

THE LIMITS OF UNLIMITED WAR: AMERICAN VICTORY
DOCTRINE FROM UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER TO PEACE
WITH HONOR, 1943-1973

by

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ABSTRACT

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The Limits of Unlimited War: American Victory Doctrine from Unconditional Surrender to Peace with Honor, 1943-1973

Dissertation directed by Professor Thomas W. Zeiler

My dissertation explains the remarkable reversal in U.S. foreign policy from victory at all costs in World War II to peace at any price in the Vietnam War. Between 1943 and 1973, the United States enacted an astonishing strategic and moral volte-face; from unconditional surrender to peace with honor, from unlimited war to limited war, and from an unwavering will to win against Germany and Japan to a desperate desire to escape Vietnam. Certainly, the shift from unconditional surrender and total victory in World War II to peace without conquest and peace with honor in Vietnam represented a change in American goals, while the turn from total or unlimited war to limited war signified a change in American strategies. But these changes were not merely evident alterations or evolutions of U.S. grand strategy and foreign policy, they indicated a less visible metamorphosis in American morality. Indeed, I argue that the decline of victory doctrine led the United States from victory at all costs to peace at any price. In World War II, victory had been the supreme moral and strategic consideration but, after Japan's unconditional surrender, U.S. strategists, commentators, and public opinion came to believe that total victory was immoral and impossible. As victory became less ethical – a shift called “debellicization” – and as minimizing casualties became more virtuous – a change I call “moral inflation” – Americans determined that victory was no longer worth the cost. The nuclear revolution thwarted America's annihilation strategy and made it impossible for the United States to win a war at acceptable cost while the nuclear taboo prevented presidents and their advisors from employing nuclear weapons. Limited wars also became unwinnable. Stalemate in Korea led U.S. strategists to negotiate an armistice, while the futility of guerrilla fighting in Indochina made them anxious to escape the Vietnam quagmire. Finally, U.S. strategists turned against killing and dying as their valuations of both American and enemy lives increased. Together, debellicization and moral inflation caused the United States to lose the disposition, determination, and willingness to pay the price of victory.

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Introduction

“Don’t you want a hat?” the British Prime Minister asked the American President. The noon sun made January 24, 1943, a beautiful Sunday in Casablanca, French Morocco, but the North African heat was beating down on them. “I was born without a hat,” Franklin D. Roosevelt replied. The hatless President wore a gray suit and held a long cigarette holder while beside him in a spruce pin-stripe suit Winston S. Churchill puffed on a signature cigar beneath a worn gray Hornburg. The two leaders sat next to one another on the lawn of the President’s villa at the Anfa Hotel, a sunny chateau within sound of the Atlantic surf. On a hill overlooking the ocean, the hotel looked like a luxury liner cresting a green wave of palm trees and orange groves which shaded the spacious white buildings. With Bougainvillea crawling along treillages around the houses and oranges bobbing in the yard, the lush scenery resembled a holiday setting if not for the barbed wire and sentries which marked the hotel as the site of a major war conference.¹

At 12:15 P.M., Roosevelt and Churchill began their press conference and invited the forty-odd reporters who had flown in from Algiers and Tunisia to sit down on the grass in front of them while the two leaders read a statement that outlined the Allies’ goals for World War II.² After ten days of detailed meetings between the American and British staffs on how to win the war, Roosevelt announced that they were “more than ever determined that peace can come to the world only by a total elimination of German and Japanese power,” and they demanded the “unconditional surrender” of Germany, Italy, and Japan.³ Unconditional surrender meant nothing less than total victory for the Allies and the Casablanca Declaration demanded that the Axis powers quit fighting,

¹ Drew Middleton, “Leaders Go by Air,” *NYT*, January 27, 1943.

² January 24th, 1943, Franklin D. Roosevelt Day by Day, FDRPL; Marc Gallicchio, *Unconditional: The Japanese Surrender in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1.

³ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 449.

concede defeat, and surrender at the discretion of the victors. As a statement of unified Allied purpose, Roosevelt's mortal announcement also manifested an implacable will to win and committed the United States to fight to the victorious end, no matter the costs.

On January 23, 1973, exactly one day short of thirty years after the "unconditional surrender" meeting, President Richard M. Nixon, wearing a navy suit and tie, sat behind the mahogany Wilson desk in the Oval Office and prepared to address the nation on the war in Vietnam. Centered between the American and Presidential flags with the curved azure curtain behind him hiding the room's south-facing windows and golden yellow drapery, the President sat holding his speech with only a double microphone on the desk, beneath the television lights, while more than a score of journalists and cameramen crowded onto Pat Nixon's royal blue rug in front of him with their television equipment. At 10 P.M., Nixon announced to the national television and radio audience that earlier that day the United States had "concluded an agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia."⁴ Reading quickly from his papers and glancing up every so often, Nixon insisted in his deep, steady voice that peace with honor meant victory for the United States because North Vietnam had agreed to a ceasefire, all American soldiers and prisoners would return home, and South Vietnam would be able to determine its own political future. But since North Vietnamese soldiers would remain in the South, there was no guarantee that the fighting was over and, since the United States did not intend to intervene again, peace with honor really meant that the U.S. had quit the Vietnam War and settled for peace at any price.

Though thirty years apart, Roosevelt's announcement at Casablanca and Nixon's announcement ending America's involvement in Vietnam represent a remarkable reversal in U.S. foreign policy. Between 1943 and 1973, the United States completed an astonishing strategic and

⁴ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation Announcing Conclusion of an Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam," January 23, 1973, APP.

moral volte-face; from unconditional surrender to peace with honor, from unlimited war to limited war, and from an unwavering will to win against Germany and Japan to a desperate desire to escape Vietnam. Certainly, the shift from unconditional surrender and total victory in World War II to peace without conquest and peace with honor in Vietnam represented a change in American goals, while the turn from total or unlimited war to limited war signified a change in American strategies. But these changes were not merely evident alterations or evolutions of U.S. grand strategy and foreign policy, they indicated a less visible metamorphosis in American morality.

In World War II, unconditional surrender was not merely a trite slogan or policy affirmation, it was an articulation of how far the United States was willing to go to win the war. In Vietnam, peace with honor was more than a metonym for acceptable American peace terms, it was an expression of the United States' willingness to withdraw. In both wars, each doctrine implicitly indicated how much U.S. administrations, military officials, and the public at large valued victory and tolerated the human costs of war. Indeed, insofar as these formulations manifested the public or the government's willingness to exact and endure casualties, the changes in objectives or operations represented a change in the relationship between American ends and means in warfare – they changed the moral relationship between victory and its costs. Thus, the reversal from unconditional surrender to peace with honor represented a revolution in American attitudes, values, and ethics – from a willingness to achieve victory at all costs to the desire to pursue peace at any price.

This dissertation then, is about the latent causes of manifest changes. It traces the trajectory of American moral attitudes and values between 1943 and 1973 through the three major wars of the short American century: World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. By revealing and evaluating the moral reflections, qualms, and critiques of U.S. administrations, commentators, and

the American public, this dissertation examines how the United States first accepted, then rejected, the price of victory in war.

AMERICAN MORALITY

For all the crimes, follies, misfortunes, and moral dilemmas in U.S. foreign policy, historians of American foreign relations tend to present moral criticisms more than moral causes and abdicate debates about good and evil in favor of theologians, philosophers, legal scholars, sociologists, or psychologists.⁵ Instead, most diplomatic and military surveys follow the actions and reactions of events and attribute the contrasts between World War II, Korea, and Vietnam to different times and circumstances. They conclude that American presidents, advisors, and military leaders adapted their goals and strategies to the political and military situations they confronted. The United States pursued different ends and employed different means in the Vietnam War than in World War II, the argument goes, because they were different wars with different political contexts, different military realities, and different international alignments.⁶ In short, World War II's grand strategy apples do not compare to Vietnam's oranges.

Other scholars such as International Relations Realists ascribe changes over time to changes in American interests. By this instrumental reasoning, U.S. leaders adapted their goals and strategies according to what was best for the United States and everything the U.S. did, or did not do, Realists

⁵ Some examples are: Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006); E. L. Gaston, *The Laws of War and 21st Century Conflict* (New York: International Debate Education Association, 2012); John Fabian Witt, *Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

⁶ One excellent recent survey is George C. Herring, *The American Century and Beyond, U.S. Foreign Relations, 1893-2015*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

claim, was intended to further national interests – even when leaders’ rhetoric or actions were cloaked in the language of ideology, human rights, and morality. The United States thus pursued different ends and employed different means in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, because its interests were different in each war.

My dissertation tries to avoid flattening the different circumstances that the United States undoubtedly confronted in each conflict, and national security, domestic politics, economic interests, and ideology certainly all played their role in formulating U.S. foreign policy.⁷ But the reason the United States pursued unconditional surrender and unlimited war in World War II, but peace with honor and limited war in Vietnam had as much to do with changes in American ethics, values, and attitudes about war, as ideology and interests. Changes in the global balance of power, congressional majorities, and nuclear proliferation also changed Americans’ moral considerations, not just their political objectives or military tactics. The thirty-year reversal in U.S. foreign policy thus constituted not just a story about changing national strategies to meet ever-changing national interests or needs and global military realities, but a story of America’s evolving morality about war and its costs.

I therefore contend that the shifts from unconditional surrender and unlimited war in World War II, to containment and limited war in Korea, and then to peace without conquest, peace with

⁷ For national security see, John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992); Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, 1st ed (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); for domestic politics see, Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012); for economics see, Thomas J. McCormick, *America’s Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After*, 2nd ed (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Curt Cardwell, *NSC 68 and the Political Economy of the Early Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); for ideology see, Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Frank A. Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy since 1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); for religion see, Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

honor, and Vietnamization in Vietnam were manifestations of a more profound change in Americans' valuations of victory, tolerance for the human costs of war, and the will to win. Indeed, I argue that American ends, means, *and morality* changed between 1943 and 1973 from an implacable will to win in World War II, to a fervent determination to avoid World War III in Korea, to a desperate desire to escape the quagmire of Vietnam.

MORAL METHODOLOGIES

To understand how American attitudes, values, and ethics changed between World War II and Vietnam, my dissertation examines public rhetoric and popular reactions, as well as private reflections, about U.S. foreign policies. Historians Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall have recently asserted, “If historians hope to understand the course of post-1945 U.S. foreign policy and international politics, they must take seriously the governmental and other elites who formulated and implemented this policy.”⁸ My dissertation therefore examines the public and private views of U.S. strategists – senior advisors and elite policymakers at the White House and the Pentagon who engaged in instrumental (ends-means) reasoning to create U.S. foreign policy. Anyone who prioritizes and pursues particular means to achieve specific ends can be considered a “strategist,” historian Christopher Nichols recently pointed out, but my dissertation focuses on strategists who wrestled with the morality, ethics, or legality of American ends and means in warfare.⁹

The chief creator of U.S. foreign policy and the most important purveyor of its attendant moral values was the President of the United States. As the most powerful figure in the U.S. government and, arguably, the entire world between 1943 and 1973, the president and his advisors

⁸ Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, “Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (April 16, 2020): 41.

⁹ Daniel Sargent et. al, “The Uses of Strategy,” June 17, 2021, *2021 Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) Virtual Conference, June 17-20: “Variations on a Theme.”*

determined American ends and means, and their morality, more than any other agents or agencies. By focusing on policy-making by the U.S. state, my dissertation thus follows the recent admonition to recenter the United States in the history of U.S. foreign relations and places Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and their advisors at the center of American foreign policy-making.¹⁰

U.S. presidents typically announced American political objectives and defined victory in national declarations through fireside chats and major public speeches or broadcasts like Roosevelt's statement at Casablanca or Nixon's reports on the situation in Vietnam. In every war, presidents took time to explain new military developments like the dropping of the atomic bomb or operations against enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia, while others announced new foreign policies or directions such as "peace without conquest," secret negotiations, and Vietnamization. Sometimes these broad declarations of U.S. grand strategy and foreign policy were supplemented by official statements from other leading policymakers and advisors like the Secretary of State, the Secretary of War or Defense, the National Security Advisor, or the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Some scholars have questioned the reliability of presidential speeches or public rhetoric as a whole because they claim that it is just propaganda, but the historian Michael Hunt has shown that public declarations can articulate authentic foreign policy beliefs and do not simply veil or decorate "real" views because they rely on shared values and common discourse.¹¹ Typically, that discourse used secular more than scriptural terms, but U.S. strategists still relied upon the implicit principles of Just War Theory since their debates and reports discussed notions of utility, proportionality, humanitarianism, and military necessity. The administration's discourse thus constituted a moral language that extended beyond the public sphere to private meetings and personal musings, and

¹⁰ Bessner and Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations."

¹¹ Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 15.

conveyed not only ends and means but the morality that tied them together. As the political theorist Michael Walzer has written, “For as long as men and women have talked about war, they have talked about it in terms of right and wrong.” He notes that words like “aggression, self-defense, appeasement, cruelty, ruthlessness, atrocity, [and] massacre” are not just descriptions but evaluative judgments or “thick concepts” that are loaded with “moral meaning.”¹²

Those meanings are not always obvious at face value because U.S. strategists often talked in terms of strategy, military necessity, and national interest, but moral beliefs and values were still present even in documents or dialogue that did not feature explicit moral language. During World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, U.S. strategists often economized, instead of humanized, their rhetoric about casualties. They typically discussed killing and dying in terms of “costs” and “price” when they referred to military losses, enemy deaths, and American lives, and they used informal cost-benefit analyses to talk about victory. Some scholars have concluded, therefore, that the difference in language reflects the reality that strategy and morality are opposites. They contend that morality has nothing to say about war and strategy because war occupies a different moral universe beyond moral judgment “where life itself is at stake, where human nature is reduced to its elemental forms, where self-interest and necessity prevail.” *Inter arma silent leges*, Walzer reminds us, “in time of war the law is silent.”¹³ As a result, strategy is “incorrigibly immoral” and anything goes.¹⁴ Strategic terms, though, merely disguise moral meanings, they do not deny them. Walzer contends that strategy is another dialect of the language of war because it is also a language of justification.¹⁵ The terms of military necessity and instrumentalism are still moral words.

¹² Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th ed (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 3.

¹³ Walzer, 3.

¹⁴ Joseph L. Allen, “The Relation of Strategy and Morality,” *Ethics* 73, no. 3 (April 1963): 167.

¹⁵ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 13.

Those words were often expressed more in private than in public. In their public pronouncements, presidents and policymakers often exhibited personal values and administrative priorities, or gave voice to national attitudes, but they usually talked about American interests and ideologies more than morals. Indeed, the White House's ideas of morality often resembled Michael Hunt's conceptualization of ideology: "an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality." In foreign policy, these ethical ideologies formed "sets of beliefs and values" that enabled U.S. strategists to make decisions.¹⁶

As a result, U.S. strategists' moral values and ethical considerations emerged and were most evident in internal conversations and memorandums among high-level officials. As they discussed the progress of the wars, cabinet members, under-secretaries, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the National Security Council, and other advisors often expressed moral misgivings or asked ethical questions in top-secret documents and meetings at the White House. During World War II, these strategists discussed the moral consequences of unconditional surrender, the atomic bombs, and the planned invasion of Japan in the summer of 1945; in Korea, they questioned the costs of hot pursuit and bombing targets along the Yalu River in the fall of 1950; and in the spring of 1972, they debated the implications of bombing, mining, and blockading Hanoi and Haiphong in North Vietnam.

U.S. strategists also expressed moral values and attitudes when they used moral language to talk about non-moral subjects, or when they used non-moral language to talk about moral subjects. Who can dispute that killing and dying are moral issues? Attitudes, statements, and strategies about

¹⁶ Michael Hunt, "Ideology," in Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2nd ed (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 222.

them still convey moral interpretations and arguments, even if they do not involve explicit moral language.

Other terms conveyed moral attitudes even when their technical meanings were ambiguous. By their literal definitions, the terms “limited war” and “unlimited war” are useless. Typically, limited war refers to “A military conflict in which the goal is defined as short of total victory and in which one or both combatants may use less than full military resources.” An “unlimited” or “total war,” in contrast, is a war “involving a general mobilization, destruction of the opposition’s productive capacity; a war carried ‘home’ to the enemy.”¹⁷ The Prussian military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, explained, however, that there is no such thing as an unlimited war because there is always some constraint on military operations, strategies, or goals. I am also unaware of any historical circumstance where one belligerent has mobilized *all* of its resources to wage war. Clausewitz therefore argued that unlimited or, what he called, ideal or absolute war, was merely a theoretical or abstract concept but it was impossible in practice and anachronistic in history.¹⁸ Therefore, since all wars are limited to one degree or another, there is no such thing as unlimited war, and all limited wars are really just unqualified *wars*.

I nevertheless use the terms “limited” and “unlimited” war because they reflect the fundamental attitude behind each type of conflict. Even though World War II was never devoid of

¹⁷ William Safire, *Safire’s Political Dictionary* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 392–93, 748.

¹⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 21; Robert Endicott Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Robert Endicott Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*, A Westview Special Study (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979); Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973); Peter Paret, Gordon Alexander Craig, and Felix Gilbert, eds., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, *Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Dominic Tierney, *The Right Way to Lose a War: America in an Age of Unwinnable Conflicts*, First edition (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015); Donald J. Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy from the Korean War to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

limits or restraints, it is appropriate to call it an “unlimited war” because all sides largely rejected limitations on their strategies or operations. The United States, for example, demanded the unconditional surrender of its enemies, fought for total victory, and, with some notable exceptions like the use of gas warfare, largely refused constraints on its combat and even used nuclear weapons for the first and only time in history. In contrast, U.S. officials often called the Korean War a “limited war” because their ends and means were more limited than in World War II. They sought to constrain the conflict, localize the combat, and limit military operations in order to achieve more limited aims: the containment of communism and the restoration of the status quo antebellum.

Their speeches, memos, and memoirs reveal that most U.S. strategists during the short American century were not absolutists who were totally committed to moral pacifism or amoral realism. Indeed, absolute pacifism during World War II was almost exclusively a faith-based position and strategists like Henry Stimson, George Marshall, Dean Acheson, McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, Henry Kissinger, and Alexander Haig were typically not overtly moral or religious characters.¹⁹ But because they were not absolutists, they were impressionable to events, rhetoric, or perceptions and moved along the moral spectrum according to their sense of national and personal interests, ideals, and values. They made informal cost-benefit analyses to determine whether U.S. goals were worth the cost and, by asking whether American objectives were right or ethical and whether American strategies and policies were necessary, proportionate, justified, or appropriate, they struggled morally to make decent decisions in an indecent world of war.²⁰

At other times, however, U.S. strategists ignored, sidelined, or downplayed moral considerations. Presidents, advisors, and military chiefs did not see every issue as a moral dilemma and so moral opinions were often more present and presented in newspaper and magazine editorials.

¹⁹ Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 373–74.

²⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932).

Reporters and commentators like Hanson W. Baldwin at the *New York Times*, Walter Lippmann and Marquis Childs from the *Washington Post*, and the *Washington Star's* David Lawrence typically engaged moral issues and talked about the ethics and rightness of American policies. In doing so, they often applied external moral meanings or labels to American strategies and goals which the White House and Pentagon only declared or discussed in terms of effectiveness or efficiency.

Public perceptions were more difficult to aggregate and assess, but the American people frequently expressed moral attitudes and values. During the twentieth century, Americans were a profoundly moral people and deeply religious too, and they were quick to react to military and diplomatic developments. Civic and religious groups and ordinary citizens often cited the authority of the Bible and religious tradition to determine the morality or immorality of U.S. foreign policies. Clergymen, intellectuals, and average citizens often wrote letters, notes, and telegrams directly to the White House to express their religious convictions, moral outrage, and political support or opposition for unconditional surrender, preventive war, and bombing halts.

American leaders, journalists, and citizens, deliberated and debated about the costs of victory and peace in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. These national pronouncements, internal memorandums, newspaper editorials, and private letters revealed Americans' moral thinking and showed what the United States was fighting for and far the country was willing to go to achieve its goals. These discussions and arguments at four different levels of American society thus reveal how Americans' valuation of victory and tolerance for the human costs of war changed over time.

DEBELLICIZATION AND MORAL INFLATION

The crucibles of thirty years of war – mostly in East Asia and the Pacific – transformed the ways in which Americans viewed victory and its human costs.²¹ In part, as diplomatic historian Susan Brewer has written, the federal government’s “strategy of truth” which had built a patriotic coalition in support of unconditional surrender and unlimited war in World War II failed to overcome the military realities of Korea, Vietnam, and the wider Cold War, and the United States lost the political and moral consensus that had upheld American strategies since World War II.²² Americans had always told themselves triumphal war stories in which American heroes overcame overwhelming odds and defeated primitive and treacherous non-whites to bring civilization, law, and order to frontier lands.²³ But Tom Engelhardt shows how Hiroshima challenged the righteousness of the war story, stalemate in Korea contradicted its victorious ending, nuclear anxieties defied its justification, and Vietnam repudiated the story’s components completely, destroying America’s “victory culture.”²⁴

But it was the decline of victory doctrine, most of all, that led the United States from victory at all costs to peace at any price. In World War II, victory had been the supreme moral and strategic consideration but, after Japan’s unconditional surrender, U.S. strategists, commentators, and public opinion came to believe that total victory was immoral and impossible. As victory became less

²¹ For the thirty-year war thesis in Asia see Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine, *Arc of Empire: America’s Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Andrew Preston, “From Dong Dang to Da Nang: The Past, Present, and Future of America’s Thirty Years War for Asia,” *Diplomatic History* 46, no. 1 (January 2022): 1–34; Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*, Revised ed. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 55.

²² Susan A. Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²³ For descriptions of this “Frontier Myth” see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, 1st ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Richard E. Rubenstein, *Reasons to Kill: Why Americans Choose War*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010); John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America’s Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁴ Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*.

ethical – a shift Edward Luttwak calls “debellicization” – and as minimizing casualties became more virtuous – a change I call “moral inflation” – Americans determined that victory was no longer worth the cost.²⁵ The nuclear revolution thwarted America’s annihilation strategy and made it impossible for the United States to win a war at acceptable cost while the nuclear taboo prevented presidents and their advisors from employing nuclear weapons. Limited wars also became unwinnable. Stalemate in Korea led U.S. strategists to negotiate an armistice, while the futility of guerrilla fighting in Indochina made them anxious to escape the Vietnam quagmire.²⁶ Finally, U.S. strategists turned against killing and dying as their valuations of both American and enemy lives increased. Together, debellicization and moral inflation caused the United States to lose the disposition, determination, and willingness to pay the price of victory.

The nuclear revolution transformed American strategic and moral thinking. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear strategists and defense intellectuals like Bernard Brodie and Herman Kahn widely agreed that nuclear weapons had shattered the entire philosophy of war set forth by Carl von Clausewitz.²⁷ Engelhardt observes that victory had always been “an endlessly expansive concept,” and the United States had accepted total war to achieve total victory in World War II but, with weapons of “limitless destructive capacity, however, the idea of victory began to shrink.”²⁸ Once annihilation could be so complete that it would no longer serve the rational purposes of statecraft, unlimited war made total victory impossible and even irrational. Even in a limited war, nuclear weapons would be strategically and morally disproportionate to their ends, making the most

²⁵ Edward Luttwak, *On the Meaning of Victory: Essays on Strategy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 292.

²⁶ David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (New York: Random House, 1965); Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972).

²⁷ Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957); Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*; Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, 2nd ed (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); Herman Kahn, *Thinking About the Unthinkable* (New York: Discus Books, 1971); Fred M. Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).

²⁸ Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*, 159.

powerful weapons on earth pointless and wrong.²⁹ Therefore, the challenge for the United States after 1945, Andrew Bacevich explains, was “to perpetuate the advantages that had accrued to the United States as a consequence of Hiroshima and to use those advantages to advance vital American interests, without triggering World War III.”³⁰ But as Russell Weigley wrote, “When... even limited victories have threatened to demand an intolerable cost... the use of combats has had to seem less and less a rationally acceptable means for the pursuit of national objects. To add nuclear weapons to the modes of combats would add whole new dimensions of futility.”³¹

Nuclear war also became immoral because of what Nina Tannenwald calls the “nuclear taboo.” After 1945, Americans and their leaders came to abhor nuclear weapons and stigmatized and delegitimized their use. Even when using them was expedient and there was no fear of retaliation, U.S. strategists felt constrained by this moral taboo and refused to deploy weapons of mass destruction to serve national interests. Indeed, despite the U.S. government’s official nuclear policies, “the line that separates conventional from nuclear war has been meticulously preserved since 1945.”³² The demands for total victory that led to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been rejected ever since.

Even without nuclear weapons, victory in limited war seemed just as impossible. Decisive victory over communism seemed unattainable so the Truman administration substituted containment and limited war in place of unconditional surrender and unlimited war in Korea. But although American constraints precluded World War III, they also made outright victory difficult.³³

²⁹ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 365, 382.

³⁰ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 152.

³¹ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, xxii–xxiii.

³² Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2–5, 21.

³³ Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Bloody Road to Panmunjom* (New York: Stein and Day, 1985).

In Korea, the causal relationship between killing and winning – between dead bodies and mastery over the enemy – broke down. The United States enjoyed a favorable casualty ratio as the number of enemy dead far surpassed American losses, not to mention ordnance and technological advantages, but American forces could not convert their material superiority into victory.³⁴ U.S. strategists and commanders faced the same problems in the jungles and rice paddies of Indochina. No matter how many bodies their forces searched out and destroyed, the United States could not make any demonstrable progress and Americans came to believe that the war in Vietnam was unwinnable and, therefore, a mistake.³⁵ As one of the leading scholars of Vietnam, George Herring, wrote, “the enduring lesson of the Vietnam War is that power, no matter how great, has its limits.” Given the circumstances and constraints on American power, he concluded, “I do not believe that the war could have been won in any meaningful sense or at a moral or material price Americans would – or should – have been willing to pay.”³⁶

The moral price of U.S. victory inflated over time as Americans became more concerned about the human costs of war. Indeed, I argue that Americans’ willingness to exact and endure the costs of war – their will to win – declined as the value of victory decreased *and* as the value of American and enemy lives increased.³⁷ Because victory is inseparable from the human costs necessary to achieve it, war is best understood as negotiated violence, as a contest of wills, and as a moral bargain.³⁸ The changes in American goals and strategies were most manifestly moral, therefore, when Americans highlighted the relationship between victory and casualties and debated

³⁴ Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*, 61.

³⁵ A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954-1975* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009); Herbert Y. Schandler, *America in Vietnam: The War That Couldn't Be Won* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

³⁶ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4th ed (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), xiv.

³⁷ For a contrary point of view see Tirman, *The Deaths of Others*.

³⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*.

how far the United States should be willing to go to achieve its goals. In other words, when the president, his advisors, military commanders, or public commentators talked about total victory and total war or containment and limited war, they were articulating their willingness to inflict casualties on the enemy and their willingness to suffer American casualties in return in order to reach their objectives.

To achieve victory in war, the United States needed to be willing to pay its price but Americans' tolerance for the human costs of war declined over time. In the Pacific War, the United States sought to exact and endure a level of violence necessary to compel or convince Tokyo to capitulate. By the summer of 1945, U.S. strategists believed that American lives were less important than the victory they were expended to achieve. U.S. advisors and generals still sought to minimize U.S. casualties but, if they had to choose between winning the war and saving American (and Japanese) lives, they regarded victory as the greater good and endorsed an invasion of the Japanese home islands as the most effective way to win the war.³⁹

In Korea, however, the Truman administration prioritized precluding the costs of a world or nuclear war more than victory over communism. Strategists believed that an unlimited war for total victory would have been too costly, while a limited war for limited victory was not worth the price. Either way, they worried that public opinion could not stomach the casualties that would be necessary to win. These priorities and beliefs became even more pronounced in Vietnam. Unwilling to pay the price of a wider or nuclear war or an invasion of North Vietnam, U.S. strategists limited the war once again. At home, Americans became more concerned than ever before with U.S. losses.

³⁹ Michael S. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914 - 1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); A. C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan* (New York: Walker & Co., 2007); Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II: Bombs, Cities, Civilians, and Oil*, Revised edition (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016).

Television showed the awfulness of war and American boys continued to arrive home in body bags while the war's purpose and progress remained ambiguous at best and immoral at worst. Moreover, while most of the country had been either ignorant or untroubled by Japanese casualties in World War II, many Americans protested operations that hurt civilians on *both* sides and demanded that the U.S. cease bombing North Vietnam because of its destructiveness among the North Vietnamese. By the end of the war, it was Americans' intolerance for Vietnam's human costs, as much as anything else, that convinced the Nixon administration to end the war, no matter the price.

The United States thus reversed course from victory at all costs in World War II to peace at any price in the Vietnam War as American presidents, advisors, military leaders, and the public devalued victory and grew less tolerant of the human costs of war. These changes in American values, attitudes, and ethics about war and its costs ultimately led U.S. strategists to see victory as immoral and impossible. The change in moral values produced a remarkable volte-face in U.S. foreign policy and grand strategy: unconditional surrender gave way to peace with honor, unlimited war was replaced with limited war, total victory became total withdrawal. In short, the United States was willing to exact and endure the costs of total victory in World War II but never intended to win the war in Vietnam. The presidents said so themselves; the goal was not victory but peace. Roosevelt and Truman sought peace through victory, Johnson and Nixon sought victory through peace.⁴⁰

It should be added that racial attitudes were ancillary and often irrelevant to moral considerations about victory and its costs.⁴¹ John Dower has shown how anti-Japanese racism

⁴⁰ Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Marilyn Blatt Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945 - 1990*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 2nd rev. and updated ed (New York: Penguin Books, 1997); Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998); Herring, *America's Longest War*.

⁴¹ For arguments about the banality of extreme violence see Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998); Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

impelled Americans towards greater violence and brutality and turned the Pacific War into a race war.⁴² Yet even though racism was ubiquitous during World War II, it was secondary to the value of victory and the desire to save American lives when it came to using the atomic bomb.⁴³ Anti-Asian prejudices were less present in Washington and, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, U.S. strategists felt understandably anxious about the implications of deploying nuclear weapons against Koreans, Chinese, and Vietnamese.⁴⁴ Strategists were far more reluctant to use nuclear weapons, however, because the nuclear taboo had stigmatized and delegitimized them against all human beings.⁴⁵

WORLD WAR II, KOREA, AND VIETNAM

This dissertation traces Americans' moral and strategic thinking between 1943 and 1973. Part One begins in World War II and argues that the United States pursued victory at practically any cost because U.S. strategists valued total decisive victory over all other objectives and considerations. After the announcement of the Casablanca Doctrine, unconditional surrender became synonymous with victory and the official war aim for the United States. The Roosevelt and Truman administrations planned to defeat, demilitarize, and democratize their enemies but recognized that Germany and Japan might have to die in order to be reborn.⁴⁶ Total victory thus became not only the United States' goal for World War II, but its justification. Thus, against Germany and Japan, the

2006); Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁴² John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

⁴³ Andrew J. Rotter, *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁴ Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo*.

⁴⁶ Raymond O'Connor, *Diplomacy for Victory: FDR and Unconditional Surrender* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971); Michael Balfour, "The Origin of the Formula: 'Unconditional Surrender' in World War II," *Armed Forces & Society* 5 (Winter 1979): 281-301; James W. Hixson, "The Rhetoric of 'Unconditional Surrender' and the Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (November 1983): 379-400; Gallicchio, *Unconditional*.

United States adopted an annihilation strategy.⁴⁷ In the Pacific, U.S. forces rolled back the Japanese through a bloody island-hopping campaign, firebombed dozens of Japanese cities, and planned a titanic invasion of the Japanese home islands. Meanwhile, the Manhattan Project assembled two atomic bombs. All were designed to force Japan's unconditional surrender.

Part Two covers the Korean War and shows how it marked the turning point in America's moral-strategic thought and linked the ends, means, and morality of World War II with Vietnam. In June 1950, after North Korean forces invade South Korea, President Truman and his advisors decided to intervene and assembled an international coalition to resist communist aggression.⁴⁸ Indeed, Truman's concerns about the costs of war and his anxiety about provoking the Soviet Union led the United States to contain the war as much as it fought to contain communism.⁴⁹ U.S. strategists rejected unconditional surrender and total victory over communist forces and instead limited their objectives to containing communism.⁵⁰ At first, the United States "refought" the Second World War, especially after China entered the war and General Douglas MacArthur lobbied to escalate and enlarge the war.⁵¹ But, ultimately, the Truman administration waged a limited war

⁴⁷ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*; Thomas W. Zeiler, *Annihilation: A Global Military History of World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁸ On containment see Roy Jenkins, *Truman* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986).

⁴⁹ Donald R. McCoy, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1984); James Irving Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941-1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985).

⁵⁰ Walter LaFeber, "Crossing the 38th: The Cold War in Microcosm," in L. H. Miller and R. W. Pruessen (eds.), *Reflections on the Cold War: A Quarter Century of American Foreign Policy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974); Barton J. Bernstein, "The Policy of Risk: Crossing the 38th Parallel and Marching to the Yalu," *Foreign Service Journal* 54, no. 3 (1977): 16-22, 29; James Irving Matray, "Truman's Plan for Victory: National Self-Determination and the Thirty-Eighth Parallel Decision in Korea," *Journal of American History* 66, no. 2 (September 1979): 314-333; William E. Pemberton, *Harry S. Truman: Fair Dealer and Cold Warrior* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989).

⁵¹ D. Clayton James and Anne Sharp Wells, *Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Free Press, 1993); Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950-1953* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Roger Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy During the Korean War," *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988-1989): 50-91; Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*; Conrad C. Crane, "To Avert Impending Disaster: American Military Plans to Use Atomic Weapons during the Korean War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23, no. 2 (June 2000): 72-88; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005 [1982]).

because U.S. strategists worried about the costs of another world war with nuclear weapons and the United States restricted its objectives to restoring the status quo antebellum and ending hostilities.⁵² The Truman administration thus substituted containment, limited war, and peace with honor in place of total victory, unlimited war, and unconditional surrender.

Part Three reviews the Vietnam War and shows how Korea turned out to be a dress rehearsal for Vietnam, militarily and morally.⁵³ As the United States intervened to defend South Vietnam from communist forces, U.S. forces waged a limited war for limited ends.⁵⁴ One month after the first U.S. combat troops entered South Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson announced that the United States was trying to achieve “peace without conquest,” which really meant peace without victory since U.S. strategists had rejected unconditional surrender and total victory. Even though Johnson chose war, his administration ultimately enlarged the war in order to keep it small because the costs of peace were more acceptable.⁵⁵ After the Tet Offensive and the Battle of Hue in 1968, U.S. strategists believed that victory was impossible or that the war could not be won at an acceptable cost.⁵⁶ At that point, peace without conquest turned into peace with honor as the Nixon administration tried to end America’s involvement in Vietnam on an acceptable basis by

⁵² David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1964); David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade – And After: America, 1945-1960* (New York: Vintage, 1961); Trumbull Higgins, *Korea and the Fall of MacArthur: A Precis in Limited War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960); Cabell Phillips, *The Truman Presidency: The History of a Triumphant Succession* (New York: Macmillan, 1966); Michael Schaller, *Douglas MacArthur: The Far Eastern General* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Offner, *Another Such Victory*.

⁵³ Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*; Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2011).

⁵⁴ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁵⁵ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Stephen Peter Rosen, “Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War,” *International Security* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 83-113.

⁵⁶ Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970); David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); Mark Bowden, *Huế 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017).

implementing the Nixon Doctrine.⁵⁷ The administration began to de-escalate the conflict by withdrawing American soldiers while handing more of the combat burden to South Vietnam through Vietnamization. Nixon and Kissinger eventually wrested an honorable agreement from Hanoi but, knowing that North Vietnam would violate the agreement and that anti-war sentiments had conditioned Americans to value withdrawal and peace more than honor, the Nixon administration accepted an end to the war. By making peace with honor, Nixon bargained for peace at any price.⁵⁸

In 2003, another thirty years after peace with honor, former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara reflected on his own participation and America's role in World War II and Vietnam and stated, "I think the human race needs to think more about killing." He then asked, "how much evil must we do in order to do good?"⁵⁹ This question lies at the heart of my research and the future of U.S. foreign policy. My dissertation is not meant as a moral judgment and I make no attempt to convict or acquit American strategists or the country for their ends and means in thirty years of war. Instead, I aim to analyze their moral values and the moral causes that transformed American policies. Now, fifty years after peace with honor and the end of the Vietnam War, I try to answer McNamara's haunting question.

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998); William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015).

⁵⁸ Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill, NC; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Jeffrey Kimball, "How Wars End: The Vietnam War" *Peace and Change* 20, no. 2 (April 1995): 183-202; Jussi Hanhimaki, "Selling the 'Decent Interval': Kissinger, Triangular Diplomacy, and the End of the Vietnam War, 1971-73," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 14, no. 1 (March 2003): 159-194; Ken Hughes, *Fatal Politics: The Nixon Tapes, the Vietnam War, and the Casualties of Reelection* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

⁵⁹ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2003).

Part I. Total Victory: Unconditional Surrender and Unlimited War in World War II, 1943-1945

During World War II, the United States pursued victory at practically any cost because U.S. strategists valued total and decisive victory over all other objectives and considerations. At the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt defined total victory as the “unconditional surrender” of Germany, Italy, and Japan. That meant that the Axis powers would have to quit fighting, concede defeat, and surrender at the discretion of the Allies – without receiving any guarantees from the victors. Thereafter, unconditional surrender became synonymous with victory and the defining objective for the United States in World War II.

But unconditional surrender was not only an end but a means to an end. It was the Allies’ formula for winning the war *and* winning the peace. Twenty-five years earlier, U.S. strategists remembered, the Allies had failed to completely defeat Germany in World War I and, by stopping short of total victory, they had failed to win and secure the peace, thereby opening the door for a second world war. This time, they vowed to totally defeat Germany and Japan so that they could never threaten world peace again. By achieving unconditional surrender, U.S. strategists aimed not only to defeat their enemies, but to demilitarize and democratize them – thereby turning them into new nations that would promote peace and preclude conflict. Only total victory in World War II could prevent the start of World War III. In that way, unconditional surrender was both an idealistic and pragmatic formula for fighting a war to end all wars.

Unconditional surrender gave the U.S. military a straightforward goal: fight until the enemy either lost the will to fight and surrendered unconditionally or were totally defeated and lost the capacity to fight altogether. But critics alleged that unconditional surrender was extreme, idealistic,

and immoral, while Germany and Japan considered it unacceptable. Complete surrender or death was certainly an extreme objective and America's unlimited aims were limited by the friction of war and enemy resistance. In Italy, the policy's first test results came back inconclusive in September 1943 because of the unusual political circumstances there. In the Pacific, unconditional surrender was challenged by Japanese resistance and their indefatigable determination to never surrender. Meanwhile, as American and British forces prepared to invade France in the summer of 1944, the U.S. military worried that demands for unconditional surrender would harden Germany's resolve to fight to the death.

Unconditional surrender provoked controversy at home as well. Many Christians denounced the formula on moral grounds, but other Americans claimed the policy would ultimately do more good than evil. Unconditional surrender also divided American socialists and galvanized pacifists, but the policy remained popular because Americans despised the Nazis and the Japanese and denounced appeasement. The longer the war lasted, however, the more Americans criticized the policy for making the war longer and costlier than necessary.

Nevertheless, Roosevelt and his administration remained unmoved by the critiques and the President refused to clarify or mollify the policy. Roosevelt repeatedly insisted that unconditional surrender only meant the defeat of Germany, Italy, and Japan, and the destruction of their militarism which had caused the war; it did not mean the destruction of the German, Italian, or Japanese people. But even though Roosevelt maintained that the United States would not be a vindictive victor, and that the ultimate goal of the war was peace, he did not believe lasting peace was possible without total Allied victory. In the end then, Roosevelt and U.S. strategists implacably pursued unconditional surrender because they believed it was the only way to defeat, demilitarize, and democratize America's enemies.

Unconditional Surrender

From the moment that the United States entered World War II, U.S. strategists spoke of fighting for “total victory” for the Allies and the total defeat of their enemies. President Franklin D. Roosevelt set the tone for American goals and strategies the day after Congress declared war on Japan. In his fireside chat on December 9, 1941, he announced, “We are now in this war. We are all in it – all the way.” The president predicted a long and hard fight but the United States would not accept any outcome “save victory, final and complete.” Victory meant that “Japanese treachery” would have to be “wiped out” and “the sources of international brutality” had to be “absolutely and finally broken.” To accomplish those goals, Roosevelt warned, the United States would have to get its hands dirty – “modern warfare” was a “dirty business” after all. But even though Americans might not like it, they were in the war now and the president pledged that the U.S. would “fight it with everything we’ve got.” America’s “true goal,” however, was more than retribution. Now that the U.S. had to “resort to force” Roosevelt was “determined that this force shall be directed toward ultimate good as well as against immediate evil.” The war was not about conquest or vengeance, but for a safe and secure world, and the president promised that the United States would win the war and win the peace.¹

As commander-in-chief, Roosevelt became the most prolific spokesman for victory. In typical fustian rhetoric, Roosevelt declared on the first day of 1943 that “Our task on this New Year’s Day is... to press on with the massed forces of free humanity till the present bandit assault upon civilization is completely crushed.”² In a fireside chat with the nation six months later he announced, “We shall not settle for less than total victory. That is the determination of every

¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Fireside Chat,” December 9, 1941, APP.

² Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Statement on War and Peace,” January 1, 1943, APP.

American on the fighting fronts. That must be, and will be, the determination of every American here at home.”³ And the following month, on the second anniversary of the Atlantic Charter, the President declared “We are determined that we shall gain total victory over our enemies.”⁴

THE CASABLANCA CONFERENCE

After a succession of Axis victories in the early years of the war, Allied offensives in North Africa, Guadalcanal, and Stalingrad suggested that the tide was turning in 1943. General George C. Marshall and his military planners had not yet developed a strategy for victory though, which was unsurprising since the United States’ “whole habit in war had been first to declare, then to prepare.”⁵ Accordingly, in January 1943, the Western Allies organized the conference in Casablanca, in Roosevelt’s words, “to win the war, to make plans for the winning of the war.”⁶ At Casablanca, U.S. strategists defined total victory in more specific, but no less extreme, terms when Roosevelt and Winston Churchill demanded “unconditional surrender by Germany, Italy, and Japan.”⁷ Thereafter, unconditional surrender became synonymous with total victory and the official Allied policy in World War II. Although the phrase was controversial from the pronouncement, unconditional surrender meant that the Allies would force their enemies to quit fighting, concede defeat, and surrender without receiving any guarantees from the victors. The Casablanca doctrine also signified the price that the United States was willing to exact and endure in order to win the war and unconditional surrender ultimately meant victory at any cost.

³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Fireside Chat,” July 28, 1943, APP.

⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Statement on the Second Anniversary of the Atlantic Charter,” August 14, 1943, APP.

⁵ Maurice Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1990 [1959]), 3.

⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Excerpts from the Press Conference,” February 2, 1943, APP.

⁷ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 395.

Despite its harsh terms, unconditional surrender or “surrender at discretion” was not without precedent.⁸ Roosevelt appropriated the term from General Ulysses S. Grant, and the President was fond of recounting the story of the term’s origins. As he explained to the press at Casablanca, the phrase “unconditional surrender” originated in the American Civil War.⁹ After Grant had surrounded the Confederate forces at Fort Donelson in Tennessee, Confederate General Simon Bolivar Buckner wrote to Grant on February 16, 1862, and requested a formal armistice and appointed commissioners to negotiate the terms of surrender. Grant replied in his trenchant manner, “No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works.”¹⁰ Thereafter, U. S. Grant would be called “Unconditional Surrender” Grant.

In World War II, the U.S. government first considered unconditional surrender as a formal strategic aim in the spring of 1942 when the State Department’s Advisory Committee on Postwar Foreign Policy organized the Subcommittee on Security Problems. Chaired by Norman H. Davis, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, the subcommittee met weekly to discuss postwar security arrangements and included other seasoned diplomats such as Breckinridge Long, an Assistant Secretary of State and personal friend of the president; John MacMurray, a Special Assistant to the Secretary of State; Green H. Hackworth, the legal adviser to the State Department and part of Cordell Hull’s inner circle; and Leo Pasvolsky, another assistant to Hull and the executive officer of the Advisory Committee. Maj. Gen. George V. Strong and Admiral Arthur J. Hepburn also joined the subcommittee as representatives of the War and Navy Departments, respectively. In its third meeting, on May 6, 1942, the subcommittee discussed the end of the war

⁸ H. I. Brock, “Unconditional Surrender,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 5, 1944.

⁹ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 395.

¹⁰ Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 182.

and began “with the assumption that unconditional surrender will be exacted of the principal defeated states.”¹¹ At the next meeting on May 20, the subcommittee reached a consensus “that nothing short of unconditional surrender by the principal enemies, Germany and Japan, could be accepted, though negotiation might be possible in the case of Italy.”¹² By the time of the Casablanca conference the following year, Davis had informally apprised President Roosevelt of the subcommittee’s thinking on unconditional surrender, although the State Department had not made any policy recommendation.¹³

Roosevelt then discussed the concept of unconditional surrender with the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the White House on January 7, 1943, the week before he left for Casablanca. According to the record of General John R. Deane, the president said he was planning to speak to Churchill about informing Joseph Stalin that the United Nations would continue fighting “until they reached Berlin, and that their only terms would be unconditional surrender.”¹⁴ By the time the conference began, therefore, the President knew that the policy had support, but no staffs in the State or War Departments had studied the concept.¹⁵

At Casablanca, Churchill suggested in a meeting of the Combined American and British Chiefs of Staff on January 18, that the U.S. and Great Britain release a statement declaring that “the

¹¹ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 329.

¹² DOS publication no. 3580, *Postwar Foreign Policy Preparation, 1939-1945* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949), 127.

¹³ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 329; DOS publication no. 3580, *Postwar Foreign Policy Preparation, 1939-1945*, 127.

¹⁴ Robert L. Dennison, Memorandum for The President, July 26, 1949; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL. See also *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 383.

¹⁵ Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944*, 39. Admiral Leahy later claimed that he had no recollection of any discussion about unconditional surrender before the Conference and that he first learned of policy when Roosevelt informed him after the Casablanca meeting. General Marshall recalled the meeting on January 7 but did not remember any mention of a surrender policy. He thought the issue was brought up casually and, since the meeting discussed more important items, “the mention of ‘unconditional surrender’ passed unnoticed.” See Robert L. Dennison, Memorandum for the President, July 26, 1949; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

United Nations are resolved to pursue the war to the bitter end, neither party relaxing in its efforts” until Germany and Japan had both surrendered unconditionally.¹⁶ The Prime Minister later explained, “It must be remembered that at that moment no one had a right to proclaim that Victory was assured. Therefore, Defiance was the note.”¹⁷

Roosevelt apparently raised the phrase sometime before though, in an informal conversation over food with Churchill and Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt’s right-hand advisor and diplomatic troubleshooter.¹⁸ According to Elliott Roosevelt, the president’s son, he and his father ate lunch with Hopkins and Churchill on Saturday, January 23, and the younger Roosevelt claimed that “it was at that lunch table that the phrase ‘unconditional surrender’ was born.” However, no official record of the conversation has been found and the discussion likely took place several days earlier since Churchill had already talked about the formula to the combined staffs. Elliott Roosevelt recalled though that his father introduced the principle and Hopkins immediately liked it. Churchill “munched... thought, frowned, thought, finally grinned,” and exulted that the policy would make Goebbels and the other Nazis “squeal.” The President also thought the policy was “just the thing for the Russians.” Then, the four men solemnized the occasion: “Churchill lifted his ever ready glass in toast. ‘Unconditional surrender.’ We put no exclamation point after it – there was only determination. We all drank.” This scene would look great on the big screen but it makes for poor history. The drama is entirely Elliott Roosevelt’s. Hopkins’ notes did not mention the lunch meeting

¹⁶ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, nos. 355, 383.

¹⁷ Robert L. Dennison, Memorandum for The President, July 26, 1949; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

¹⁸ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 383.

or the toast and Churchill recalled informal conversations with the President over food, but nothing so formal or impressive as an oath, like Jacques-Louis David's *Horatii*, to unconditional surrender.¹⁹

At the end of the conference, when Roosevelt and Churchill hosted their press conference on January 24 (which came to be known as the “unconditional surrender” meeting) the president and the prime minister announced and explained this new policy. Roosevelt and Churchill had agreed that “peace can come to the world only by the total elimination of German and Japanese war power.”²⁰ This determination and policy were not new, however. “I think we have all had it in our hearts and heads before,” the President clarified, but up until the conference the concept had never been written down. In front of the press, Roosevelt specified that the unconditional surrender of Germany, Italy, and Japan meant “the elimination of [their] war power” and “the destruction of the philosophies in those countries based on conquest and the subjugation of other people.” Unconditional surrender did not mean the destruction of the German, Italian, or Japanese people, but it did require their total defeat which would provide “a reasonable assurance of future world peace.”²¹

Although unconditional surrender did not originate at Casablanca, Roosevelt's announcement was nevertheless unprecedented in that it marked “the first time that a sovereign state had been formally offered no terms short of total and unconditional capitulation.”²² Indeed, an unpublished Army study in February 1944 reported that “modern history does not... afford a single example” of one nation or group of nations imposing unconditional surrender upon another.

Armies had surrendered unconditionally (like Buckner's to Grant at Fort Donelson), “but not an

¹⁹ Elliott Roosevelt, *As He Saw It* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946), 117-119; *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, nos. 383; Robert L. Dennison, Memorandum for The President, July 26, 1949; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

²⁰ Gallicchio, *Unconditional*, 1.

²¹ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, nos. 395, 448-449.

²² Ian Kershaw, *The End: Hitler's Germany, 1944 - 45* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 7.

entire nation or people.” This was because no modern victor had ever been able to bring “the enemy to where he had no further power or will to resist.” The closest example was probably the American Civil War when the South fought to exhaustion, its armies surrendered, and then its government dissolved. But unconditional surrender was never imposed in general terms by Grant and Sherman. In every other modern conflict, the vanquished reached “a state where proposed conditions of surrender were preferred to the probable loss and suffering incident to the unequal continuance of the struggle.” By announcing the unconditional surrender policy, the study continued, “the Allied powers [were] pioneering” a new course in international relations.²³

At Casablanca, the United States and Great Britain stipulated that the only acceptable outcome of the war was total victory in which the Axis powers either lost the will to fight and surrendered unconditionally or were totally defeated and lost the capacity to fight altogether. Unconditional surrender also assured the absent Joseph Stalin and the Soviets, whose forces were exacting and enduring catastrophic casualties on the Eastern Front, that the western democracies were equally committed to defeating Hitler and would prosecute the war to the end. They would not conduct a separate peace with Germany, Italy, or Japan.²⁴

Casablanca produced no real long-range plans for Allied victory, though. The unconditional surrender announcement was only that, a broad pronouncement of Allied goals and a shorthand formula for total victory that conveyed the Allies’ united resolve and purpose in the war. As an Allied mission statement, however, unconditional surrender concealed as much as it revealed since the slogan screened the different national strategies and visions that made the Grand Alliance a marriage of wartime expediency. Nevertheless, the term reinforced the American military’s policies

²³ Unconditional Surrender Selected Reading List, February 10, 1944; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

²⁴ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 281.

for a decisive war of annihilation to achieve decisive total victory. Henceforth, all American plans for the war would call for the unconditional surrender of their enemies.²⁵ On November 1, 1943, the United States, Great Britain, China, and the Soviet Union affirmed their determination to fight to the end and totally defeat Germany and Japan by signing the Moscow Declaration which committed the Allies to continue fighting against the Axis powers until they “laid down their arms on the basis of unconditional surrender.”²⁶

Unconditional surrender would also ensure that the Allies won not only the war, but the peace as well. Just weeks before the Casablanca announcement, Roosevelt had declared in his 1943 State of the Union Address that “Victory in this war is the first and greatest goal before us. Victory in the peace is the next.” Indeed, the president repeatedly spoke of fighting for a “decent peace and a durable peace.”²⁷ In his fourth inaugural address in January 1945, Roosevelt once again spoke of winning the war and the peace when he proclaimed, “we shall work for a just and honorable peace, a durable peace, as today we work and fight for total victory in war.”²⁸ But, as Roosevelt had explained at Casablanca, the Allies did not believe genuine or lasting peace for future generations was really possible unless they destroyed the German and Japanese philosophies of conquest and subjugation. “The war-breeding gangs of militarists must be rooted out of Germany – and out of Japan – if we are to have any real assurance of future peace,” the president told Congress in September 1943.²⁹

The policy of unconditional surrender thus looked forward to achieving lasting peace by looking backward to avoid the failures of the First World War only a generation before. As the Army’s 1944 study explained, Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points had not gone far enough and his

²⁵ Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944*, 2, 38-41.

²⁶ *FRUS, 1943, General*, vol. I, no. 684.

²⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Message to Congress re The State of the Union,” January 7, 1943, Speech File 1447-A, MSF, FDRPL.

²⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1945, APP.

²⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Message to Congress on the Progress of the War,” September 17, 1943, APP.

“humanity and liberality” in World War I allowed Germans to claim that they had not been defeated in the war but stabbed in the back. This myth had ultimately led to German rearmament, irredentism, and a second world war and the Allies were determined not to let this happen again. The process of events from the German surrender in 1918 to the Casablanca Conference in 1943 proved that World War II required “a surrender formula which would leave no doubt in the fanatical minds of the Germans and their allies as to their absolute defeat. No hope must be left for a future renewal of the struggle... when surrender comes there must be no doubt in the enemy mind as to his absolute and hopeless defeat and that in the future it will be more profitable for him to share in, rather than by force to attempt the destruction of, human liberty.”³⁰ Unconditional surrender, therefore, was not just a statement of goals for military outcomes and material results but for psychological realities – it was a determination to destroy the enemy’s capacity and will to resist by impressing upon them the irresistible truth of their defeat.

Defeating and breaking the Axis’ will to fight through unconditional surrender was not meant to punish or humiliate Germany and Japan, but to transform them into new nations. The U.S. and Britain needed their enemies to surrender unconditionally so that the Allies could turn Axis swords into plowshares and ensure that they would never threaten the west again.³¹ Unconditional surrender was, therefore, a *sine qua non* for changing German and Japanese regimes and reshaping their societies through pacification, demilitarization, and democratization, and that could only occur through total Allied victory and total German and Japanese defeat.³² In short, U.S. strategists believed unconditional surrender was not only an end, but a means to an end – an essential

³⁰ Unconditional Surrender Selected Reading List, February 10, 1944; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

³¹ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 281.

³² Richard Hobbs, *The Myth of Victory: What Is Victory in War?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 141; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 225; Herring, *The American Century and Beyond, U.S. Foreign Relations, 1893-2015*, 254; Gallicchio, *Unconditional*, 1.

steppingstone to beneficial regime change, nation-building, social engineering, and abolishing war, the formula for winning the current war and for preventing future wars.³³

In its ambitions for total victory, generational peace, and international liberalism, unconditional surrender represented a characteristically American war aim as Americans once again found themselves fighting a war to end war.³⁴ As a surrogate for victory and a means for peace, unconditional surrender exemplified both the realism and idealism of American war-making. In practical terms, U.S. strategists adopted unconditional surrender as a realistic and pragmatic objective for defeating Germany and Japan, winning the war, and preventing future wars. But they also wanted to transform the meaning of victory from a simple military outcome into a grand idealistic solution to the world's pathological violence. By achieving unconditional surrender, U.S. strategists hoped to create long-term security for the United States and a lasting peace for the world – exactly the sort of world order and global balance of power that the Versailles Peace Conference had failed to preserve after the First World War. Evoking the Four Freedoms in a speech in Ottawa in August 1943, President Roosevelt proposed that “by unanimous action in driving out the outlaws and keeping them under heel forever, we can attain a freedom from fear of violence.”³⁵ The famous journalist Walter Lippmann longingly explained, “By the wise use of our victory we can now put an end to the series of wars which have devastated the world for some thirty years. We can then have something much better than another armistice which will last only as long as nations are too weary to fight again. We can have a long peace such as no man now of middle age has ever known.”³⁶

³³ Recent research suggests that unconditional surrender effectively functioned as an international New Deal program designed to change militaristic regimes into democratic societies, see Gallicchio, *Unconditional*.

³⁴ H. G. Wells, *The War That Will End War* (New York: Duffield & Company, 1914); H. G. Wells, *In the Fourth Year: Anticipations of a World Peace* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1918).

³⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address at Ottawa, Canada,” August 25, 1943, APP.

³⁶ Walter Lippmann, *U.S. War Aims* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1944), 131.

Rhetorically and morally, U.S. strategists turned the Second World War into a Wilsonian crusade for international liberalism.

Many Americans found such aspirations quixotic, but the Army's 1944 study claimed that unconditional surrender would secure and safeguard human liberty more permanently than "a less ambitious objective." At the same time, the study noted that in war, as in life, "a price must be paid commensurate with the value received" and Americans would have to "steel [themselves] to pay the required price" of unconditional surrender.³⁷

The policy itself was "simple, clear, and explicit." The Army's study explained "Merely bring your enemy to where he has no further power or will to resist, and he will forthwith surrender without condition. ... As a defendant at law, when his defense seems hopeless, throws himself on the mercy of the court, so the conquered in the case of unconditional surrender would submit without condition to the will and decision of the conqueror." But by the same token, the study acknowledged that a nation at war would only stop fighting "when all means of defense are exhausted or the sentence or terms to be imposed will... outweigh possible advantages of further resistance." This, then, was the "joker" in the formula – the dilemma of unconditional surrender: How far would the United States go and what would it cost the conqueror to bring Germany and Japan to the point where they would cease resistance and submit to the absolute will of the Allies? How far would Germany and Japan go to resist, "even after defeat is seen to be inevitable, involving loss and suffering both to conquered and conqueror?" How much "sacrifice and suffering" would the defeated be willing to endure, even in a hopeless cause, due to "imponderables" like "pride, fanatical patriotism, or spiritual belief"?³⁸

³⁷ Unconditional Surrender Selected Reading List, February 10, 1944; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

³⁸ Unconditional Surrender Selected Reading List, February 10, 1944; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

LIMITS TO UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

For the U.S. military, unconditional surrender gave them a definitive goal: to defeat the enemy decisively; and “As long as political objectives and military considerations seemed compatible, unconditional surrender appeared a tenable concept.”³⁹ But the very qualities that made unconditional surrender appealing, useful, or effective as a policy, goal, or slogan also made it objectionable. During World War II, critics alleged that the policy was extreme, idealistic, and even immoral while Germany and Japan considered it unacceptable.

As a military policy unconditional surrender was extreme. General Buckner, the policy’s first victim who had been forced to yield Fort Donelson to U.S. Grant in 1862, had acknowledged that he had been compelled to surrender because of “the overwhelming force” under Grant’s command but he nevertheless condemned unconditional surrender as “ungenerous and unchivalrous terms.”⁴⁰ Ungenerous indeed. Unconditional surrender offered no guarantees to the Axis powers and since the policy did not provide any opportunity for a compromise or armistice, it left room for little or no nuance in the outcome of the war. In fact, the policy was so extreme that people in both Axis and Allied countries believed that Roosevelt and Churchill did not really mean unconditional surrender and that the terms should not be taken literally. The Army’s 1944 study defended the policy, however, and insisted that it contained “no implications of injustice, lack of humanity, or unreasonableness.”⁴¹ Despite the criticisms, U.S. strategists refused to give up their visions of total victory and President Roosevelt continued to repeat his Casablanca terms. He told White House correspondents in February 1943 that the U.S. was determined “to fight this war through to the finish” by which he meant “the day when United Nations forces march in triumph through the

³⁹ Maurice Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944*, 428.

⁴⁰ Chernow, *Grant*, 183.

⁴¹ Unconditional Surrender Selected Reading List, February 10, 1944; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

streets of Berlin, and Rome, and Tokyo.” American policy towards Japan, he explained, was the same as American policy towards the Nazis, “it is a policy of fighting hard on all fronts, and ending the war as quickly as we can, on the uncompromising terms of unconditional surrender.”⁴²

But the application of those terms proved controversial. As Allied forces approached and invaded Italy in the summer of 1943, Americans heard rumors that the fascist government in Rome had appealed for peace and some thought the Allies’ harsh surrender terms were strengthening Italian resistance. Senator Burton K. Wheeler (D-MT) therefore called on President Roosevelt to define and modify unconditional surrender in order to establish peace and democracy more quickly throughout Europe and to save American boys and thousands of innocent civilians.⁴³ The Italian press had even suggested in May that unconditional surrender was really just a grand rhetorical flourish, not a declaration of real peace terms, and that the Allies would be prepared to preserve the House of Savoy. Washington insisted, however, that Italy could “get peace at any time by unconditional surrender” but not any other way.⁴⁴

Italy’s surrender in September 1943 thus offered the first test of unconditional surrender as a practical basis for ending the war. The results came back inconclusive, however, because of the unusual circumstances in Italy. The Germans still controlled most of the country and much of the Italian armed forces, making it impossible for the new Italian government to enforce its orders to surrender. The situation became even more muddled after Italy declared war on Germany in October and the Allies recognized the new government as a co-belligerent. Lastly, some of the “long terms” of surrender that Italy signed on September 29 were postponed while Italy demonstrated its good faith by fighting alongside the Allies.⁴⁵

⁴² Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address to the White House Correspondents’ Association,” February 12, 1943, APP.

⁴³ “Urges President Appeal to Europe,” *NYT*, September 3, 1943.

⁴⁴ “Grandi Peace Plea Denied,” *NYT*, May 29, 1943.

⁴⁵ Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944*, 428-429.

In the Pacific, the insistence on unconditional surrender was complicated by Japanese resistance since Japan's government and soldiers refused to surrender, on any terms. Regarding any kind of surrender as an individual and national disgrace, the Japanese considered unconditional surrender completely unacceptable and so Tokyo simply did not give much thought to ending the war. Faced with either victory or defeat, national triumph or national humiliation, the Japanese were never likely to accept American terms. Americans denounced the Japanese as fanatics for refusing to surrender while the Japanese condemned Americans as extremists for demanding unconditional surrender. Surrender thus became an *Idée fixe* for officials on both sides as the unstoppable force collided with the immovable object. For American strategists, nothing less than total American victory and total Japanese defeat would suffice since the policy was necessary to ensure the complete destruction of Japanese militarism and the reconstruction of Japan as a peaceful democratic state in the American image. Over time, however, unconditional surrender became a war aim in and of itself insofar as it represented total American victory. Even when it became clear that Japan might be remade without surrendering unconditionally, U.S. strategists fixated on unconditional surrender and rejected any alternative or negotiated outcome.

The same criticisms about unconditional surrender surfaced among the U.S. military as the United States and Great Britain prepared for an invasion of France. Some Allied planners had dreamed that the Germans might surrender before a cross-Channel invasion and when they did not, Allied strategists hoped to ease the costs of invasion by relaxing the demands for unconditional surrender, which would give the Germans less reasons to resist.⁴⁶

By the end of January 1944, some British planners doubted the wisdom of unconditional surrender. The British Joint Intelligence Committee pointed out that German propaganda was using

⁴⁶ Matloff, 428.

the policy to harden German resistance and the British asked their American counterparts to consider the policy's value. The American Joint Intelligence Committee studied the issue and concluded that the policy exhibited Allied determination which might eventually have a material effect in breaking German resistance, but they admitted that German propaganda agencies were using the surrender terms as an indication that the Allies would exterminate Germany, enslave the people, and commit atrocities. Since the Allies had not contradicted the German claims, the propaganda was succeeding in stiffening Germany's will to resist and the committee recommended that the Allies take steps to counter the German propaganda and hasten the Reich's collapse. The Joint Strategic Survey Committee agreed with the Joint Intelligence Committee and informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff that it would be in the military's interest to restate or clarify unconditional surrender. If necessary, the U.S. and Great Britain could issue a joint announcement before the Normandy invasion which might weaken Germany's resistance to the attack.⁴⁷

Army planners had mixed feelings about amending the policy, however. In the Army Operations Division's Theater Group, General C. A. Russell favored modification telling General John Hull in March 1944 that the harshness of the phrase was killing American soldiers and that "[Modification] is not sentiment with me – just good business." But since the terms had not been clarified when they were first announced at Casablanca, Hull worried that to do so now would be interpreted as a sign of weakness. The Army's chief planner, General Frank N. Roberts, felt that if Great Britain and the Soviet Union were unilaterally softening their stance on Germany, then a combined statement was unnecessary. He criticized "dogmatic adherence to unconditional surrender" and felt that the time was "ripe" for propaganda that would help the U.S. achieve total victory in Europe, but any pronouncements should emphasize "the necessity for the Germans to rid

⁴⁷ Matloff, 429-430.

themselves of the substance as well as form of Nazism.” He likewise thought a statement on unconditional surrender could help reduce the resistance to the invasion of France. But Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy opposed any alteration of the surrender policy. He pointed out that Germany’s number one fear was the Red Army and what it would do if/when it reached Germany. “It is this ogre (the Soviet Army), rather than any phrase coined at a conference, which keeps them going,” he wrote to the Army Chief of Staff in February 1944. “I would not, by setting up an easy way out, disabuse them of the thought that they cannot carry out their own devastations every generation without getting some of it themselves.”⁴⁸

Nevertheless, at the end of March 1944, the Joint Chiefs asked Roosevelt to soften his attitude on unconditional surrender. They noted that the policy’s current form enabled the Nazis to raise fears of annihilation and harden German resistance. Using the recommendations from the Joint Strategic Survey Committee, the Chiefs urged a restatement of surrender policy in order to establish favorable conditions for the Allied invasion of France. In their draft to the president, the Chiefs reassured the German people that the Allies sought to destroy Germany’s capacity for military aggression, but they had no intention of eradicating the people themselves. Roosevelt refused further clarification, however. He pointed out that, in his Christmas Eve speech the previous year, he had already mentioned that the Allies had no intention of enslaving the German people and that, after surrendering to the Allies, they would be able to live in peace as members of the European community.⁴⁹ The problem, Roosevelt further explained, was that the Joint Chiefs’ statement presupposed a reconstitution of the German state. While that might lead more quickly to the end of the war and peace in Europe, the president argued that “German Philosophy cannot be changed by decree, law or military order. The change in German Philosophy must be evolutionary and may take

⁴⁸ Matloff, 429-430.

⁴⁹ Matloff, 431.

two generations.” Without unconditional surrender, Europe would have “a period of quiet followed by a third world war.” He maintained that the best thing for the United States to do was “to stick to what I have already said,” namely, that the Allies were committed to Germany’s total defeat, but that they had “no intention of destroying the German people.” Roosevelt was also not willing to deny that the Allies did not intend to “destroy the German nation.” If Germany was to be thoroughly rehabilitated so that German militarism and aggression would never threaten world peace again, it would not only have to be defeated and demilitarized, it would have to be de-nazified and democratized. The Allies would have to “eliminate the very word ‘Reich’ and what it stands for today,” he wrote.⁵⁰ If the Allies were to prevent a third world war they would have to completely defeat Germany and eradicate the root attitudes, philosophies, and values that had caused the first world wars. Unconditional surrender was the only way to do that and the Normandy invasion went forward without any clarification or change in the surrender terms.

Roosevelt similarly rebuffed the State Department. When undersecretary of state Edward Stettinius visited London in April 1944, General Eisenhower and General Walter Bedell Smith tried to convince him that the policy needed clarification in order to weaken Germany’s will to resist but Roosevelt held firm. The president wrote to Cordell Hull that he understood the difficulties with America’s surrender formula, “but I want at all costs to prevent it from being said that the unconditional surrender principle has been abandoned.” The president did not want to start making exceptions to the general principle. He admitted there could be exceptions, but those were different from changing the principle itself.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *FRUS, 1944, General*, vol. I, no. 273.

⁵¹ Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944*, 431.

Public controversy over unconditional surrender continued as the war progressed. Many American Christians denounced unconditional surrender on moral grounds although the policy faced less opposition than Allied bombing campaigns.⁵² Writing for *Fellowship* magazine, the pacifist Laurence Housman wrote in September 1943 that unconditional surrender would only be worthwhile if the Allies had “the will and the spiritual insight to use their military victory for the good all – that is, with equal *good will* to all.” Otherwise, the policy would have “devastating results for victor and vanquished alike” and would threaten the future of world peace. Absolute pacifism insisted that the unconditional surrender of the Allies was better than the continuation of the war since “the spiritual material for making good use of complete victory [was] just as non-existent” among the Axis as the Allies. Housman concluded, therefore, that unconditional surrender would ultimately produce the same evil, regardless of who won or lost, and that it was better for true Christians “to be wronged than to do wrong.”⁵³

But others focused on the good that unconditional surrender might accomplish. New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia wanted unconditional surrender to lead to demilitarization and he called for the U.S. to “so thoroughly crush fascism, nazism and Japanese aggression” that those countries would never again threaten world peace.⁵⁴ At the Naval Reserve Midshipman’s School at Columbia University in February 1944, Captain John K. Richards insisted that a negotiated peace could not produce lasting peace, only unconditional surrender could do that. Victory had to be final so that America’s enemies would realize that “this world will never again permit their inhuman intolerance, their intellectual dishonesty and their military chicanery.”⁵⁵

⁵² Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 376.

⁵³ Laurence Housman, “Unconditional Surrender,” *Fellowship* 9, No. 9 (September 1943): 155.

⁵⁴ “Bar Fighter Dole, La Guardia Urges,” *NYT*, December 5, 1943.

⁵⁵ “‘Flying Steel’ Urged As Message For Foes,” *NYT*, February 22, 1944.

That same month, *The Christian Science Monitor* wrote that unconditional surrender was “a policy dictated by experience.” The last time the Allies had given Germans “a break” they had used it to rob the Allies’ victory. Although some Americans thought such harsh terms would scare the Germans into fighting to the end, the paper noted the Wilson’s Fourteen Points did not encourage Germany to surrender any faster and that the Germans did not want to accept even a “soft peace.” This time, then, the German people would just have to trust the Allies “to pursue the course we think best for all.”⁵⁶

Unconditional surrender also divided American socialists. The Socialist Party’s five-time nominee for president, Norman Thomas, installed platform planks in June 1944 that called for “an immediate peace offensive,” condemned unconditional surrender along with appeasement and imperialism, and accused the Roosevelt administration of prolonging the war and inviting future wars by supporting the restoration of European empires.⁵⁷ But the national chairman of the Social Democratic Federation, Algernon Lee, disagreed with Thomas. One of the “Old Guard” who had broken with Thomas and the Socialist Party in 1936, Lee issued a public statement in February 1945 calling for the United States to keep unconditional surrender. The objective of the war was “to destroy the Nazi Government, root and branch,” and if the U.S. abandoned its policy, it would betray the Allies’ purpose in fighting the war since a mutual peace agreement would never allow the Allies to punish Nazi war crimes.⁵⁸

In 1943, a group of pacifists organized the Peace Now Movement and advocated ways to end the war short of unconditional surrender. Led by Dr. George Wilfred Hartmann, a Harvard psychology professor and a former Socialist candidate for mayor in New York, the movement

⁵⁶ “Unconditional Surrender,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 24, 1944, 16.

⁵⁷ “Socialists Demand A Peace Offensive,” *NYT*, June 4, 1944.

⁵⁸ “Disagrees with Thomas,” *NYT*, February 19, 1945.

denounced unconditional surrender in favor of a negotiated settlement and called for a world peace conference. In an address at Carnegie Chamber Music Hall in December 1943, Hartmann claimed that Germans and Japanese were no better or worse than Americans or British and he argued that unconditional surrender played right into the enemy's hands by prolonging the war. He concluded that Americans could have "either victory or peace; they cannot have both. To win the war is the surest way to lose the peace."⁵⁹

By and large though, unconditional surrender remained popular since most Americans held little sympathy for the Nazis and the Japanese, and they deplored appeasement. But as Hartmann's speech showed, the arguments for and against unconditional surrender were really about peace – the kind of peace the United States wanted and how much the U.S. was willing to exact and endure to achieve that peace.

The longer the war lasted, the more Americans criticized unconditional surrender for making the war longer and costlier than necessary. The policy seemed to sacrifice complexity and nuance for simplicity and idealism which threatened to prolong the very conflict it aimed to end by precluding alternative endings. The Peace Now Movement and the Socialist Party favored a negotiated peace over unconditional surrender because they valued peace more than victory. Others wanted the Roosevelt administration to adjust its demands and offer more acceptable terms or guarantees in hopes of getting less victory at less cost. President Roosevelt continued to insist, however, that unconditional surrender was the best way to win the war and win the peace.

Roosevelt repeatedly insisted that the German, Italian, and Japanese people did not need to fear unconditional surrender.⁶⁰ Although some complained that the policy was "too tough and too

⁵⁹ "A Negotiated Peace Is Urged At Meeting," *NYT*, December 31, 1943.

⁶⁰ "President Says Surrender Will Free Axis Peoples," *NYT*, August 26, 1943.

rough,” Roosevelt justified the terms by recounting the story of Robert E. Lee’s surrender to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse.⁶¹ As the president described it, by April 1865 Lee’s army was starving, his soldiers had not slept for two or three days, and their arms were nearly exhausted. Faced with the decimation of his men, Lee went to Grant and asked for terms of surrender. “Unconditional surrender,” the Union general replied. Lee protested that he could not afford those terms; he needed food for his starving troops and their cavalry horses belonged to Confederate officers who needed them back home. Grant said, “Unconditional surrender.” Lee relented. Only after his enemy surrendered unconditionally did Grant reveal his magnanimity. He asked Lee if his army needed food and then told Lee to have the Confederate officers take their horses home for spring plowing.⁶²

“There you have unconditional surrender,” the president announced to the press in Honolulu in July 1944. His administration remained determined to defeat Germany and Japan so that they could never deny their surrender in the future, and to demilitarize them so that they could not start another world war. Germany and Japan could not surrender on any other terms and the United States would not modify its demands. If the Germans and Japanese thought unconditional surrender was harsh, they could rely on the fact that the Americans were not vindictive monsters. “We are human beings – normal, thinking human beings,” Roosevelt explained, and the Germans and Japanese could place their confidence in American fairness and trust that the United States would be reasonable. Like General Grant, the president announced that the United States would

⁶¹ Roosevelt called the Appomattox surrender the “best illustration” of unconditional surrender and he told the story of Lee and Grant publicly on at least two occasions: to Secretary of State Cordell Hull in January 1944, and then to the press at Honolulu in July 1944. See, *FRUS, 1944, General*, vol. I, no. 265.

⁶² Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Excerpts from the Press Conference in Honolulu,” July 29, 1944, APP.

help Germany and Japan “get back on their feet physically. We don’t believe in wholesale starvation.”⁶³

The Committee on Post-War Programs clarified in November 1944 that “hostilities will be carried on against Japan until that nation has laid down its arms on the basis of unconditional surrender or until it has been completely defeated.” In other words, the U.S. intended to wage war until Japan either lost the will to fight, or until Japan lost the capacity to fight. In a nutshell, unconditional surrender indicated the inherent “right of the victors to impose whatever items they wish on the vanquished.” Given those terms, the committee expected the Japanese to “fight to the end” – until they no longer had the capacity to wage war – and they recommended that the United Nations make it clear that Japan would still be expected to surrender unconditionally, but the terms would “not be enforced in a spirit of vindictiveness.” After all, the committee stated, “The ultimate aim of the United Nations is not the destruction of Japan as a nation but the emergence of a Japan properly discharging its responsibilities in the family of nations.”⁶⁴

But if the United States promised that surrender would not be vindictive, the means of achieving that surrender certainly were. Even though the ultimate goal of the war was still peace, Roosevelt did not believe there could be a genuine or lasting peace without a total Allied victory. The greater the victory, the greater the peace. The president, of course, was aware of victory’s potential costs and he tried to explain to the rest of the country why the United States was committed to pursuing peace through victory, rather than peace for its own sake. In March 1944, he confessed to the Advertising War Council Conference that “We have got a long, long road to go.” He knew that Americans wanted to believe that peace was at hand but the president debunked that notion. Peace was not just around the corner – “It just plain isn’t,” he announced. “It’s a long road,

⁶³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Excerpts from the Press Conference in Honolulu,” July 29, 1944, APP.

⁶⁴ *FRUS, 1944, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, the Far East*, vol. V, no. 1224.

and a difficult road. We are going to have big losses.” Although he was personally confident of victory in the long run, Roosevelt claimed that those who sought peace without total victory were “honorably and honestly, working in just the wrong direction.” Just the day before, Roosevelt had received a five-page letter from a prominent retired citizen who pled with the president to appoint a “secretary of peace” to negotiate an agreement to end the war’s slaughter. Roosevelt made it clear that he too wanted peace but he insisted that there could be no peace without victory. Real peace involved more than just an armistice, it required an end to German and Japanese aggression and a transformation in the philosophy of German and Japanese government. Only victory could affect those changes. Roosevelt conceded that the peace plea made for a beautiful and sincere letter – “it’s an honest thing, from his heart” – and he knew there were many other Americans who were honestly seeking for peace. Roosevelt did not believe that they were traitors or had some sort of ulterior motive, “they just don’t know,” he stated, they needed some education about reality. He advised peace-loving Americans to trust their leaders and to let Dr. Win the War do his job. “We are going to win the war,” he told the conference, “it is going to take an awfully long time – and we don’t like to be interfered with in the winning of the war.”⁶⁵

To win the peace, the Allies had to win the war first. In his letter accepting the nomination for an unprecedented fourth term as president in July 1944, Roosevelt wrote, “To win this war wholeheartedly, unequivocally, and as quickly as we can is our task of the first importance. To win this war in such a way that there be no further world wars in the foreseeable future is our second objective.”⁶⁶ Later that month, Roosevelt reiterated his points to the Democrats at their national convention in Chicago: “What is the job before us in 1944?” he began, “First, to win the war – to win the war fast, to win it overpoweringly. Second, to form worldwide international organizations...

⁶⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Remarks to the Advertising War Council Conference,” March 8, 1944, APP.

⁶⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Letter Agreeing to Accept a Nomination for a Fourth Term,” July 11, 1944, APP.

to make another war impossible within the foreseeable future.”⁶⁷ Echoing Roosevelt’s rhetoric, the Pacific war correspondent Robert Sherrod affirmed, “we must crush the Japanese utterly, so that our sons will not have this war to fight again in twenty or thirty years hence.”⁶⁸ Roosevelt remained convinced that unconditional surrender was the key to making victory complete enough to ensure a long-lasting peace, and U.S. strategists agreed that the only way to force Japan’s unconditional surrender was to pay the price that victory demanded. Ultimately, U.S. strategists were willing to pay whatever victory cost because they believed it was worth the price. As Joseph Grew from the State Department explained, once “the scourge of war” had been removed, “The Pacific and the Far East” would “justify the effort and the sacrifices involved.”⁶⁹

Ultimately, Roosevelt took a white-knuckled approach to the principle of unconditional surrender but loosened his grip when administering it. Under pressure from Great Britain and the Soviet Union, Roosevelt did modify the application of surrender terms to Bulgaria and Romania in May 1944, but otherwise, he remained completely committed to his original pronouncement.⁷⁰ His advisors followed suit. When German peace feelers reached Washington in the final year of the war, Secretary of State Cordell Hull rejected them and reiterated U.S. demands.⁷¹ In the fall of 1944, the *New York Times* reported that a consensus of “responsible Government officials” agreed that the United States should establish more specific terms for the end of the war to better incentivize the Germans to make peace. Others worried that unconditional surrender was becoming more “paralysis” than policy. But Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau argued that the German people, not just their government, had to have defeat imposed on them so that they would never

⁶⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago,” July 20, 1944, APP.

⁶⁸ Robert Sherrod, *Tarawa: The Story of a Battle* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944), 51.

⁶⁹ Joseph C. Grew, *Report From Tokyo: A Message to the American People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1942), 69.

⁷⁰ Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944*, 428, 431.

⁷¹ “Hull Spurns Foe on Peace Feelers,” *NYT*, August 31, 1944.

again commit atrocities.⁷² In part, the administration stayed the course to avoid accusations of appeasement, but most of all, they kept the policy to win the war and win the peace.⁷³

Roosevelt was not known for his dogmatism, but he was mulish on unconditional surrender because he knew it would appeal to Americans and his unwavering dedication to the policy generally discouraged military officials in Washington, London, or the Pacific from pursuing the subject again.⁷⁴ Roosevelt was either stubborn or steadfast depending on whether strategists and scholars criticized or championed the Casablanca doctrine. Either way, his persistence was a product of both realism and idealism. The very concept of unconditional surrender seemed unrealistic insofar as it hoped that Germany and Japan would surrender at the discretion of the Allies. And as a means to a future world without militarism and aggression, the policy seemed quixotic. But for Roosevelt, there was simply no other way and he stuck with unconditional surrender as a pragmatic plan for achieving the defeat, demilitarization, and democratization of America's enemies.

⁷² John H. Crider, "Specific Peace Terms for Reich Now Advocated in Washington," *NYT*, October 8, 1944.

⁷³ D. Clayton James, "American and Japanese Strategies in the Pacific War," in Paret, Craig, and Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 725.

⁷⁴ Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944*, 431-432.

Unlimited War

By pledging themselves to lasting peace through the unconditional surrender of their enemies, U.S. strategists committed the country to unlimited war. Extreme ends led to extreme means and total victory for the Allies required the total defeat of the Axis and led logically to total war. To force the unconditional surrender of their enemies, therefore, U.S. strategists pursued the annihilation and attrition of German and Japanese forces to destroy their capacity and will to resist. U.S. strategists also pursued unlimited war because they believed they were fighting a just war for the good of the nation and the good of the world – for national security and world peace. Because they were fighting for such virtuous ends, U.S. strategists believed the United States was justified in pursuing the surest and quickest path to total victory. Secretary of War Henry Stimson explained that as long as American war policies “did not directly and violently contravene” the general principles of the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms, it was appropriate that U.S. actions “should be governed by the overriding requirement of victory, in the confidence that as victory was the greatest common immediate objective, action which advanced victory must in general promote good international relations.”¹ The ends justified the means.

As one of the preeminent statesmen of his generation and a leader in U.S. foreign policy, Henry L. Stimson was more conscientious than most strategists about the ethics of warfare and the relationship between victory and its costs. After attending Yale and Harvard Law School, Stimson joined a prestigious New York law firm headed by former Secretary of State and War, Elihu Root, before devoting himself to public service. He served as Secretary of War under William Howard Taft and then fought in France as an artillery officer during World War I. After the war, he became one of

¹ Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 565–66.

the initial members of the Council on Foreign Relations and served as Governor-General of the Philippines under Calvin Coolidge, and then as Secretary of State for Herbert Hoover. He returned to private life after Roosevelt's election and became an outspoken opponent of Japanese aggression but, when war broke out, the president recalled the 73-year-old Stimson in 1940 to head the War Department once more.² In his memoirs, the American Ares explained that the United States needed to be willing to do whatever it took to win. After all, the only reason to go to war in the first place was to win and Stimson insisted that "the only way to fight a war is to fight it with your whole and undiluted strength." Discussions about what it would take to win were appropriate for limited objectives and smaller campaigns like the Spanish-American War, but in great world conflicts they were meaningless.³ The path to victory could not be limited. As Stimson explained,

The only way to minimize the final ghastly price of World War II was to shorten the struggle, and the only way to shorten it was to devote the entire strength of the nation to its relentless prosecution. Every sign of division was an encouragement to the enemy, and every concession to self-indulgence was a shot fired in folly at your own troops. The only important goal of the war was victory, and the only proper test of wartime action was whether it would help to win.⁴

Winston Churchill similarly told Congress in May 1943: "we must beware of every topic, however attractive, and every tendency, however natural, which divert our minds or energies from the supreme objective of the general victory of the United Nations."⁵

Since victory was the sole purpose of warfare, Stimson criticized Americans who gave "allegiance" to other priorities and worried, like Roosevelt, that public ignorance and lack of will

² Wilson D. Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 22.

³ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 471–72; Sean L Malloy, *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010).

⁴ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 472. Stimson added, "In the mind of a fanatic, of course, the convictions set out in the last paragraph might well have led to absurdity."

⁵ *Address of the Right Honorable Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain delivered before a joint meeting of the two Houses of Congress on Wednesday, May 19, 1943* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1943), 10.

could undermine the war effort and limit American victory and the ultimate peace. Although he was always confident in united American power, Stimson claimed that “the strength of Americans was only equaled by their ignorance, both of war and of high politics, and without the leadership of a firm and stouthearted President they could never have been mobilized for victory.” The American people often resisted the steps necessary “for an all-out prosecution of the war” and Stimson doubted whether they had the will to win.⁶ In a radio address on March 9, 1943, the Secretary of War claimed that even patriotic Americans did not always or fully realize what the United States was facing and did not understand the purpose and importance of the government’s war policies. He reminded listeners that the U.S. was engaged in “the most fierce and dangerous war” in its history and Americans were, perhaps unknowingly, but dangerously, “trying to win the war... in some easy manner and without too much trouble and sacrifice.” Stimson also criticized those who claimed that the war was a foregone conclusion, who feared victory would cost the U.S. its republican government or democratic freedoms, who shied away from hard fighting, or those who engaged in “wishful thinking,” dreaded “personal sacrifices,” and sought “a better way out.”⁷ Hard fighting, Stimson insisted, was the very thing that would help the United States win the war. He argued that battles and wars were won “by continuous rapid blows upon an enemy” and that when “an enemy begins to show signs of demoralization these blows must be continued and, if possible, redoubled ... he must be constantly pursued and hammered until he is completely beaten or surrenders.”⁸ Stimson admitted that these tactics sounded brutal, but he maintained that winning the war definitively was justified because it would ultimately save time and lives.

⁶ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 470–71.

⁷ Stimson and Bundy, 477–78.

⁸ Stimson and Bundy, 477–78.

Logically and morally then, total victory and total war required maximum effort. Since he believed that unlimited war would ultimately save time and lives, Stimson supported any measure that might ensure and hasten American victory, from total mobilization to the atomic bomb. Speaking in favor of a National Service Act, Stimson claimed that “Every month the war is prolonged will be measured in the lives of thousands of young men, [and] in billions of dollars.”⁹ Churchill used the same logic in May 1943 when he told Congress: “If we wish to abridge the slaughter and ruin which this war is spreading to so many lands and to which we must ourselves contribute so grievous a measure of suffering and sacrifice, we cannot afford to relax a single fiber of our being or to tolerate the slightest abatement of our effort.”¹⁰

But while U.S. strategists accepted the logic of military necessity – that total victory required total war – they often overlooked its moral irony. Roosevelt had insisted at Casablanca that unconditional surrender meant “the elimination of [the Axis] war power” and “the destruction of [their] philosophies,” it did not mean the destruction of the German, Italian, or Japanese people.¹¹ Future events would prove, however, that unconditional surrender meant only that the United States would not seek the destruction of the German or Japanese people as a political goal or end. It did not mean that the U.S. would not seek their destruction as a *means* to achieve unconditional surrender, total victory, and lasting peace.

For U.S strategists, virtuous outcomes, like the demilitarization and democratization of Germany and Japan and lasting world peace, exceeded or legitimated the immoral actions that were necessary to achieve them. To win the war as completely as unconditional surrender demanded today, and to win all the wars tomorrow too, meant that the United States would have to be willing

⁹ Stimson and Bundy, 484.

¹⁰ *Address of the Right Honorable Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain delivered before a joint meeting of the two Houses of Congress on Wednesday, May 19, 1943*, 9.

¹¹ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, nos. 395, 448-449.

to kill and die on an enormous scale since the Roosevelt Administration suggested that Germany and Japan could not be reborn unless their nations died first.

The value of victory thus increased the tolerance for the human costs of war and U.S. strategists tried to inflate Americans' commitment to killing and dying in order to win. The most prophetic attempt to brace Americans for the price that the U.S. would have to exact and endure to defeat Japan came from Joseph C. Grew, a Special Assistant to the Secretary of State. One year after Pearl Harbor, Grew published *Report From Tokyo*, based on his nearly ten years of service as ambassador to Japan. Because of racist and Eurocentric perceptions, Grew worried that Americans did not take the Japanese seriously as a military or political power. He warned Americans that they were "face to face with a powerful, resourceful, utterly ruthless, and altogether dangerous enemy."¹² Unlike America's European enemies, he noted, "Japan did not have to turn Fascist or National Socialist; morally, Japan was already both. Japan has needed no Hitler."¹³ The United States, therefore, could not afford to underestimate "the all-out, do-or-die fanatical spirit of the Japanese military machine" and Grew warned that unless the American people understood the spirit and power of the Japanese, the "road to victory [would] be doubly long and hard and bloody."¹⁴

What made the Japanese so dangerous, he explained, was that they were willing to do whatever it took to win. Grew warned that the Japanese were driven toward conquest by a "ruthless will" which "knows neither gentleness nor mercy. It is utterly ruthless, utterly cruel, and utterly blind to any of the values which make up our civilization. The only way to stop that will is to destroy it."¹⁵ He continued, "'Victory or Death' is no mere slogan for these soldiers. It is a plain, matter-of-fact description of the military policy that controls their forces, from the highest generals to the newest

¹² Grew, *Report From Tokyo*, vii.

¹³ Grew, 16.

¹⁴ Grew, 19.

¹⁵ Grew, 25.

recruits. The man who allows himself to be captured has disgraced himself and his country.”¹⁶ By 1943, Americans were already optimistic about victory, but Grew portended a grim contest in the Pacific:

we are up against a powerful fighting machine, a people whose morale cannot and will not be broken even by successive defeats, who will certainly not be broken by economic hardships, a people who individually and collectively will gladly sacrifice their lives for their Emperor and their nation, and who can be brought to earth only by physical defeat, by being ejected physically from the areas which they have temporarily conquered or by the progressive attrition of their naval power and merchant marine which will finally result in cutting off their homeland from all connection with and access to those outlying areas – by complete defeat in battle.¹⁷

Tokyo expected to win, Grew explained, because of their confidence in Japanese fighting abilities and their “false contempt” for the Allies. The Japanese believed that affluence and technological advancement had made Western Civilization soft and degenerate and they were sure that Western underestimates, Allied divisions, and America’s “unwillingness to sacrifice, to endure, and to fight” would ultimately enable the Japanese to prevail through “grim endurance.”¹⁸ Grew testified:

I know Japan; I lived there for ten years. I know the Japanese intimately. The Japanese will not crack. They will not crack morally or psychologically or economically, even when eventual defeat stares them in the face. They will pull in their belts another notch, reduce their rations from a bowl to a half bowl of rice, and fight to the bitter end. Only by utter physical destruction or utter exhaustion of their men and materials can they be defeated... That is what we are up against in fighting Japan.¹⁹

To defeat such a foe “conclusively, and leave no margin for a recurrence of that threat in future,”²⁰ Grew asked his countrymen to meet Japan’s level of dedication, ruthlessness, and even fanaticism. He did not wish to see American “blood, sweat, and tears *indefinitely and unnecessarily prolonged*” but Americans had to realize that their total victory and Japan’s total defeat would require

¹⁶ Grew, 30.

¹⁷ Grew, 9.

¹⁸ Grew, 16, 23

¹⁹ Grew, 29.

²⁰ Grew, vii.

“nothing less than the exertion of our maximum capacities.” That meant the American people would have to guard against complacency and self-satisfaction. Grew had no doubts about final Allied victory, “but if we Americans think that, collectively and individually, we can continue to lead our normal lives, leaving the spirit of self-sacrifice to our soldiers and sailors, letting the intensification of our production program take care of itself, we shall unquestionably risk the danger of a stalemate in this war of ours with Japan.”²¹

Killing and dying were thus essential to victory. Although he did not call for the extermination of the Japanese people, “no matter how extreme was the folly of their leaders,” Grew insisted that “The Japanese military machine and military caste and military system must be utterly crushed... [and] utterly broken, for the future safety and welfare of civilization and humanity. Surely ours is a cause worth sacrificing for and living for and dying for, if necessary.”²² Indeed, he argued that the United States could only be sure of victory when the American people completely devoted themselves to the war effort and accepted its incumbent sacrifices.

ISLAND-HOPPING

The American people largely embraced the idea of total victory and supported the calls for maximum effort from their leaders and the measures that completed and hastened victory, but they murmured about the length and costs of the war. Public complaints upset government officials like Grew and Stimson who worried that U.S. citizens did not have the stomach for the costs and time that victory would require. Winston Churchill therefore warned Congress in May 1943 about the dangers of “the undue prolongation of the war.” Germany and Japan’s main hope for victory, the prime minister explained, was to drag out the war’s length and cost until “the democracies are tired,

²¹ Grew, 8-9.

²² Grew, 87, 10.

or bored, or split.”²³ General George C. Marshall put it more succinctly in a 1949 interview when he declared that a democracy could not fight a seven years’ war.²⁴

America’s pursuit of total victory and unconditional surrender was thus challenged by public intolerance for long wars and high casualties which created demands for cheap victory. Knowing that the American people would not tolerate a slow and costly fight, U.S. strategists searched for silver bullets or shortcuts that would allow them to satisfy all their objectives and win the war decisively, quickly, and at minimal cost. When they could not meet all of their goals simultaneously or equally and had to choose between winning completely, at the earliest possible date, and with as few American losses as possible, they opted for total victory which remained the defining, supreme purpose of combat throughout the war, and superseded all other objectives and concerns.

Against Japan, total victory became a race against the clock. When Roosevelt and Churchill first announced unconditional surrender in January 1943, Japanese forces occupied Korea, Manchuria, and large swaths of China, as well as Indochina, Burma, the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines, and a thousand islands across the Pacific. All of this would have to be retaken “and all this and much else will have to be repaid,” Churchill told Congress in May 1943.²⁵ There were no shortcuts across the Pacific Ocean and its size – vast enough to hold all the land mass on the planet – made the theater largely a naval war in which American fleets sought to destroy the Japanese fleet and its bases in the Central and South Pacific so that American marines could assault Japanese islands.²⁶ While the liberation of Asian and Pacific territories would result in a decisive and total

²³ *Address of the Right Honorable Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain delivered before a joint meeting of the two Houses of Congress on Wednesday, May 19, 1943, 9-10.*

²⁴ “Interview III: Part 2,” Interview with General Marshall by Dr. Sidney T. Matthews, Dr. Howard M Smyth, Major Roy Lemson, and Major David Hamilton, Office of the Chief of Military History, at The Pentagon, Room 2E844 (July 25, 1949), GCMF.

²⁵ *Address of the Right Honorable Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain delivered before a joint meeting of the two Houses of Congress on Wednesday, May 19, 1943, 1.*

²⁶ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 285–86.

Allied victory, U.S. strategists recognized that rollback would consume more time and lives than they were willing to expend. At Casablanca, for example, Roosevelt met with the Combined Chiefs and noted that an advance from one island to the next all the way across the Pacific would be too time-consuming.²⁷ Three weeks later at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner in February 1943, the president publicly explained that the U.S. did not merely intend to inch its way across the Pacific from one island to the next. That would take too long.²⁸

Rather than attacking every single Japanese stronghold on every island across the Pacific, therefore, U.S. strategists decided to leapfrog their way towards Japan by attacking only the most salient and strategic points necessary to force Japan's defeat. In this way, U.S. strategists hoped to defeat Japan decisively, but also quickly, and at minimal cost. General Douglas MacArthur explained leapfrogging or island-hopping as "hitting 'em where they ain't" – borrowing a phrase from the diminutive right-fielder "Wee Willie" Keeler – which allowed U.S. forces to systematically defeat the Japanese while saving valuable time and, above all, American lives. Otherwise, the United States would have to fight a perpetual series of costly amphibious assaults with almost no chance for strategic surprise. Once the navy's new fast carriers arrived in the Pacific, U.S. forces were able to hop from one island to the next, choosing their attacks according to the island's individual value or the capacity it would provide to strike at the Japanese home islands.²⁹ The overall goal was not simply to reverse Japanese victories or undo their conquests but to advance toward Japan in a timely and cost-effective manner until the Allies could attack Japan itself.³⁰

²⁷ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 387.

²⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address to the White House Correspondents' Association," February 12, 1943, APP.

²⁹ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 289–90.

³⁰ Thomas W. Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat: Japan, America, and the End of World War II* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2004), 93.

Every island was still costly and time-consuming though. Just as Joseph Grew had warned, the pursuit of total victory was challenged by Japanese resistance across the Pacific where their desperation, devotion to the imperial cause, and commitment to kill as many Americans as possible triggered American revenge, racism, and extraordinarily brutal fighting. If it was possible, Japanese resistance on each island grew more stubborn and ferocious and their defenses became more sophisticated, intricate, and deadly which meant U.S. forces spent an inordinate amount of time “mopping up” to evict the enemy from jungles, pillboxes, caves, and tunnels.³¹ Japan’s fierce fighting and refusal to surrender seemed to exceed the bounds of rationality, humanity, and morality and forced the U.S. to compromise their own morality as well.

Japanese resistance has been so ingrained in American histories and memories of World War II that it has almost become cliché. Americans from the president on down described the Japanese people and their resistance as “fanatical” and the image of the fanatical Japanese soldier – refusing to surrender, leading a Banzai charge, piloting a Kamikaze plane, or committing ritual suicide by *Seppuku* – remains one of the most enduring tropes of the Pacific War.³² Perceptions of Japanese fanaticism took hold as Americans learned of the bombing of Chinese civilians, the Three Alls Policy (“kill all, burn all, loot all”), and the Rape of Nanking in 1937 where the Japanese army ran amok in the Chinese capital raping, torturing, and murdering hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children.³³ As the Japanese expanded their conquests, Americans heard of the rape and murder of nuns in Hong Kong, the mutilation and hanging of Englishmen in Malaya, and other

³¹ Waldo H. Heinrichs and Marc S. Gallicchio, *Implacable Foes: War in the Pacific, 1944-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8; J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 22–23.

³² For scholarly examples that cite fanatical Japanese behavior see Dower, *War without Mercy*; Matthew Hughes and Gaynor Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age* (London; New York: Frank Cass, 2005); John D. Chappell, *Before the Bomb: How America Approached the End of the Pacific War* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 162.

³³ Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

outrageous and heinous acts throughout Asia.³⁴ Over the course of the war, Japanese soldiers won infamy for the corruption of the Bushido samurai code which inspired devotion to the emperor, instilled no mercy, and taught them to die rather than surrender.³⁵

U.S. forces received their first taste of Japanese resistance when they took the initiative in the Pacific for the first time and invaded Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in August 1942. The experience exhibited many of the hallmarks of island fighting that Americans would come to despise. Tropical temperatures, humidity, and diseases attacked American soldiers as ferociously as the Japanese who died or committed suicide rather than surrender, and the enemy repeatedly refused to abandon the island.³⁶ The bloody campaign lasted six months and the U.S. Navy lost so many men that Navy officials refused to release casualty figures for years.³⁷

Guadalcanal proved to be a foretaste of future campaigns. Everywhere, the Japanese dishonored truces, issued false surrenders, attacked medical personnel, abused or tortured prisoners of war, and carried out suicide attacks.³⁸ On Guam, a Japanese officer charged a tank with a sword.³⁹ In July 1944, Lt. General Yoshitsugu Saito ordered approximately 3,000 Japanese soldiers to charge American lines on Saipan in the largest banzai attack of the war. After U.S. forces won the battle and secured the island, Japanese soldiers shot civilians who tried to surrender to the marines while defenders and local civilians committed suicide en masse at Marpi Point. Believing the government propaganda that the Americans would rape and murder them, hundreds jumped off the cliffs to

³⁴ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 20.

³⁵ Beatrice Trefalt, "Fanaticism, Japanese Soldiers and the Pacific War, 1937-1945" in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 33.

³⁶ Heinrichs and Gallicchio, *Implacable Foes*, 6.

³⁷ Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 184-90.

³⁸ Craig M. Cameron, "Fanaticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941-1945" in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 50.

³⁹ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 93.

their deaths to avoid being captured alive.⁴⁰ During the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944, with his forces heavily outnumbered, Japanese Vice-Admiral Takijiro Onishi ordered the first kamikaze attacks of the war in which Japanese pilots flew their planes directly into American ships. The airborne banzai attacks caused little damage to the American fleet but terrorized U.S. soldiers who became even more convinced that the Japanese were crazy since they would apparently resort to any means to resist American advances.⁴¹

These examples of brutal, illegal, and seemingly unintelligible Japanese behavior convinced Americans that the Japanese were a fanatical people. They simply could not fathom how Japanese soldiers and civilians could willingly choose suicide over surrender and they believed that the Japanese must have been coerced or brainwashed through propaganda or some false misguided tradition.⁴² Joseph Grew, the former U.S. ambassador to Japan, tried to explain America's enemy to his countrymen: "[the Japanese] are fanatical," he wrote. "They believe in their war, in the government which wages it, and in the incorruptible certainty of their national cause."⁴³ President Roosevelt himself publicly referred to Japanese fanaticism on several occasions. In a speech at Ottawa in August 1943, Roosevelt denounced "the fanatical militarists of Japan" and at the second Quebec Conference in September 1944, he called attention to the "almost fanatical Japanese tenacity" on Saipan.⁴⁴ The following month, in a radio address from the White House, the president noted that Japanese resistance was "as determined and as fanatical as ever."⁴⁵ Certainly, "They were a fanatical enemy;" E. B. Sledge wrote in his noted memoir of the Pacific War, "that is to say, they

⁴⁰ Zeiler, 88, 90; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 318; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 23.

⁴¹ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 305; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 109, 117–18; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 363, 365.

⁴² Brian Holden Reid, "Series Editor's Preface" in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, x.

⁴³ Grew, *Report From Tokyo*, 15.

⁴⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address at Ottawa, Canada," August 25, 1943, APP; *FRUS, Conference at Quebec, 1944*, no. 177.

⁴⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Radio Address from the White House," October 5, 1944, APP.

believed in their cause with an intensity little understood by many postwar Americans – and possibly many Japanese as well.”⁴⁶

What Americans called “fanatical” resistance was certainly motivated by blind loyalty to Japanese leaders, belief in national exceptionalism, and the vilification of Japanese enemies; but it also had a strategic logic – a method to its madness.⁴⁷ Japanese leaders knew that the United States enjoyed a seemingly unlimited capacity for war but did not believe that Americans possessed the will to wage a long, hard fight. Across the Pacific, Japanese soldiers and leaders sought to bleed the American will for war to death. Believing that the American people and their government could not stomach a long or costly conflict, Japanese strategists focused on making the war as long and as hard as possible until the lazy and decadent Allies, caught up as they were in material pleasures, would tire of the war and simply give up, leaving the Japanese empire intact.⁴⁸ In short, Japanese strategists sought to turn the war into a contest of wills and, believing that their spiritual power exceeded American material power, they hoped that as the war went on and the casualties went up, the United States would lose the will to fight and sue for peace short of unconditional surrender. Of course, American strategy relied on the same principle: exacting as many Japanese casualties as necessary to force Japan’s unconditional surrender.⁴⁹

U.S. strategists therefore adopted fanatical and extreme offensive strategies in order to overcome Japan’s fanatical defense.⁵⁰ The willingness to fight and die on one side increased the willingness to fight and kill on the other and American strategists came to view extermination as a military necessity – the only way to force Japan’s defeat and end their resistance – especially because

⁴⁶ E. B Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York: Presidio Press, 2010), 40.

⁴⁷ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, xiii.

⁴⁸ Dower, *War without Mercy*, 293.

⁴⁹ “Japanese Hopes,” *NYT*, January 5, 1944.

⁵⁰ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 2.

Japan absolutely refused to surrender on any level, as a nation, as an army, or as individual soldiers. Having sworn an oath of allegiance to the emperor, Japanese soldiers refused to surrender out of personal devotion and continued fighting even after the battle had been decided. In fact, “no organized unit of the Japanese Imperial Army surrendered during the entire Pacific war until they were ordered to do so by the emperor, after the Japanese state had formally agreed to capitulate.”⁵¹ Some Japanese soldiers continued fighting even *after* their government surrendered in August 1945. These “remaining Japanese soldiers,” known as holdouts, either doubted the surrender, rejected demobilization for ideological or personal reasons, or simply did not know that the war had ended because they were cut off from communications. Holdouts persisted almost everywhere the Americans fought and the last of the remaining soldiers, Hiroo Onoda in the Philippines, and Teruo Nakamura in Indonesia, did not give themselves up until 1974, twenty-nine years after the Second World War ended!⁵² The United States implacable demands for unconditional surrender and Japan’s indefatigable determination to never surrender created an unlimited war between them in which both sides abandoned the laws of war and moral restraints.⁵³

To defeat Japan there seemed to be no other way. On Peleliu, the Marines faced defensive entrenchments in the Umurbrogal Mountains that required napalm and bulldozers to reduce, and even then not all of the Japanese were evicted from their strongholds.⁵⁴ On Tinian, Maj. General Harry Schmidt simply ordered his Marines to massacre the enemy.⁵⁵ E. B. Sledge, a U.S. Marine who would fight at Peleliu and Okinawa, would later write, “To defeat an enemy as tough and dedicated

⁵¹ Heinrichs and Gallicchio, *Implacable Foes*, 7.

⁵² Beatrice Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950-1975* (London; New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

⁵³ Craig M. Cameron, “Fanaticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941-1945” in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 50–51; Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁵⁴ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 104.

⁵⁵ Zeiler, 96.

as the Japanese, we had to be just as tough. We had to be just as dedicated to America as they were to their emperor.”⁵⁶ Sledge recognized that to defeat a ruthless, dedicated enemy on the battlefield, you had to become the enemy – had to be just as ruthless, willing to go just as far – just as Joseph Grew had foretold. Although he never described Marines or their actions as fanatical, Sledge accepted that Americans had to fight fire with fire, that they had to be as willing to kill as the Japanese were willing to die, as willing to suffer, sacrifice, and endure as their enemies. If the Japanese rejected surrender and refused to stop fighting, the Americans would have to simply force them to stop by killing them. And, while he did not ascribe the same kind of ideological devotion to American soldiers that the Japanese appeared to fight with, he believed that the Marines’ *esprit de corps*, their dedication to their country, and their hatred of the Japanese motivated them to fight with the same levels of ferocity as their enemies. Sledge did not justify American mercilessness or extremism on any kind of moral grounds, he justified American behavior and policies through military expediency; it was the only way to win.

But although unconditional surrender legitimated unlimited war, means did not always follow ends and American violence did not always result from official purposes, strategic goals, or rational thinking and planning.⁵⁷ Even without unconditional surrender, the U.S. had no choice but to fight the war to the bitter end because they portrayed the Japanese as evil.⁵⁸ For U.S. strategists, Japanese fanaticism removed the obligation to observe the limits or rules of warfare and precluded any kind of compromise. Since the United States was clearly battling against madmen who did not fight by the rules, American strategists un-limited their war effort. As Craig Cameron explains, “Conventional restraints on the application of violence would be meaningless if the Japanese could

⁵⁶ Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa*, 170–71.

⁵⁷ Craig M. Cameron, *American Samurai: Myth and Imagination in the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division, 1941-1951* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

⁵⁸ Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 295.

neither comprehend nor accept an opportunity to escape personal or national destruction.”⁵⁹ When the Japanese violated civilized rules of warfare, killed civilians, and committed atrocities, Americans saw their enemies as cruel, barbaric, and evil who deserved to be annihilated and they murmured against the conventional restraints on their own warfare.⁶⁰ By labeling Japanese people and society as fanatical, therefore, U.S. strategists removed the fail-safe on the means used to win the war.

Provoked by Japanese behavior, they ignored American atrocities, adopted unrestricted submarine warfare, employed strategic bombing, removed protections for Japanese civilians, and generally abandoned norms of civility throughout the Pacific War. The United States thus began to defy the timeless doctrine of military necessity which holds that political and military objectives should dictate the scales and degrees of force used to attain them. Instead, U.S. strategists interpreted Japanese fanaticism as a moral justification for unlimited war.

Most of all, Americans wanted revenge, especially for Pearl Harbor which they saw as a cowardly “sneak attack” which violated the normal conventions of warfare. American hatred also increased as the Japanese turned their atrocities against U.S. soldiers. In April 1943, Americans learned that the Japanese had executed three U.S. airmen who had participated in the Doolittle Raid and bombed Tokyo the year before. In January 1944, the Roosevelt administration also revealed that after American and Filipino forces surrendered in the Philippines in April 1942, the prisoners were taken on a forced march for 65 miles to the railhead at San Fernando and then sent to a prison camp by train. Around 600 Americans and about 7,000 Filipinos died along the way from exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease, while others were executed, often brutally. Americans were incensed to hear that some of their soldiers had been shot, clubbed, or even beheaded and the Bataan Death

⁵⁹ Craig M. Cameron, “Fanaticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941-1945” in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 48, 50.

⁶⁰ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 20–21.

March, as it became known, incited American forces to take reprisals and annihilate Japanese forces.⁶¹ After the revelation of Japanese atrocities, Hanson W. Baldwin warned that the Pacific would become even more of a “grudge” fight. The latest reports, he asserted, provided “incontrovertible evidence” of Japan’s “decadence and bestiality.” What made Japanese atrocities so awful though, Baldwin wrote, was their premediated, deliberate, and wholesale nature – “these are not isolated acts of fiendish minds” but “official policy” designed to humiliate and terrorize Japan’s enemies, he claimed, which placed “the whole Japanese state outside the pale.” After two whole years of war, Baldwin was sure that atrocities were “natural... by-products of the Japanese character” and the revelations would harden American hearts, minds, and souls. American soldiers had already learned to regard the Japanese “as beasts and savages” and “to kill or be killed” and Baldwin guessed that Americans would not oppose gassing the Japanese.⁶² After U.S. troops returned to recapture the Philippines in October 1944, Roosevelt promised ever more devastating blows against Japan and invoked Pearl Harbor to justify American vengeance. He declared:

We have learned our lesson about Japan. We trusted her, and treated her with the decency due a civilized neighbor. We were foully betrayed. The price of the lesson was high. Now we are going to teach Japan her lesson. We have the will and the power to teach her the cost of treachery and deceit, and the cost of stealing from her neighbors. With our steadfast allies, we shall teach this lesson so that Japan will never forget it... We shall strangle the Black Dragon of Japanese militarism forever.⁶³

American soldiers carried out that promise as Japanese resistance provoked American atrocities and crimes in retaliation. While many scholars and veterans have observed that Japanese fanaticism created an *esprit de corps* among U.S. soldiers, it also produced similarly fanatical or extreme behaviors.⁶⁴ For example, although continuing to fight when defeat was certain seemed

⁶¹ Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 177; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 20–21; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 162; even though the scholarship now indicates that lack of Japanese planning and capabilities, more than abject cruelty, were responsible for the death march.

⁶² Hanson W. Baldwin, “A War Without Quarter Forecast in Pacific,” *NYT*, January 30, 1944.

⁶³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Statement on the Landing of American Troops in the Philippines,” October 20, 1944, APP.

⁶⁴ Craig M. Cameron in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 48.

noble to Japanese defenders, it looked idiotic, irrational, and inhuman to American attackers. Angry that the Japanese refused to surrender, U.S. soldiers often refused to take prisoners. Indeed, throughout the Pacific War, American soldiers responded to Japanese indignities, brutalities, and violations by killing the wounded, desecrating dead bodies, and collecting Japanese body parts as souvenirs. In many cases, soldiers extracted gold teeth from living or dead enemies, cut off their ears, or boiled their heads to save the skulls. The disgusting trophies were then mounted on military vehicles or shipped home to their wives, girlfriends, or family members, and even public officials.⁶⁵ Many Japanese also chose suicide over surrender because they feared the Americans would kill them in retaliation for Japanese atrocities.⁶⁶ Fueled by hatred, desperation, and fury, both sides adopted the ancient law of retribution: *lex talionis* – an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.

Racism also made the Pacific a race war in which both sides violated the rules of war and fought irrationally, which provoked further race hatreds. Americans hated the Japanese as an enemy race and characterized them as both subhuman, superhuman, and inhuman. They also viewed Japanese differently than Germans; there was no Asian counterpart to the “good German” and there certainly was no European counterpart to “Japs.” By dehumanizing one another both sides increased the psychological distance between them and made killing easier. Kill or be killed was the law on every beach, jungle, and coral island across the Pacific and both sides offered no quarter to the other.

Just like its soldiers, the Japanese high command refused to surrender, even as American successes mounted and made Allied total victory undeniable. In the summer of 1944, U.S. forces had captured Saipan and Tinian in the Marianas which placed the Japanese home islands within

⁶⁵ Craig M. Cameron, “Fanaticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941-1945” in Hughes and Johnson, 50; Karen Slattery and Mark Doremus, “Suppressing Allied Atrocity Stories: The Unwritten Clause of the World War II Censorship Code,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (December 2012): 624–42.

⁶⁶ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 23.

range of American bombers and in October the Japanese suffered immense losses in the Battle of Leyte Gulf – the largest naval battle in history. In what Admiral Chester W. Nimitz called the “Trafalgar of World War II,” the U.S. effectively destroyed the Japanese air force and turned the Japanese navy into a glorified coastguard. Scholars disagree about whether Saipan, Leyte Gulf, or some other battle decisively eliminated the contingency of final Allied victory, but by autumn 1944 “it was absolutely clear to leaders on both sides that Japan was doomed. And yet the struggle dragged on for another year.”⁶⁷ Without an air force or navy to defend their territories, suicide attacks became the major Japanese weapon while the loss of their defensive forces also left Japanese cities even more vulnerable to bombing.⁶⁸ Despite the inescapable reality that the United States had defeated Japan’s military forces in the Pacific, Japan continued to resist.

The island-hopping campaign in 1944 confirmed what U.S. strategists already suspected and dreaded – that a single massive battle of annihilation, or even repeated victories, would not be sufficient to defeat Japan. The United States would have to defeat Japan multiple times, militarily, materially, and psychologically – in other words, totally – in their capacity to fight and in their will to fight. Admiral Ernest J. King had decided to attack the Marianas Islands in June because he figured victory there would decrease the war’s ultimate timetable and costs. But the brutal fighting, banzai attacks, suicides, beheadings, and civilian murders convinced U.S. strategists that the Japanese would only stop fighting after Japan had been invaded and completely overpowered.⁶⁹ The war would end when the Japanese stopped fighting and they would stop fighting when they were dead and no longer had any capacity or will to speak of.

⁶⁷ Dower, *War without Mercy*, 11, 293–94; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 316.

⁶⁸ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 304; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 118; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 46.

⁶⁹ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 80; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 324.

Each island thus served as a microcosm of the Pacific War. Each assault presaged the next and U.S. strategists regarded every island as a miniature model of Japan. Guadalcanal was the first and, depending on the veteran or scholar, Tarawa, Peleliu, Iwo Jima, or Okinawa was the worst. But although the environmental and physical conditions were different – from Guadalcanal’s jungles and Tarawa’s beaches to Peleliu’s coral spines, Iwo Jima’s caves, or Okinawa’s mud – they were equally hellish, and the moral impact was the same each time. Each island attack raised questions about the public tolerance for the costs of war, hardened the willingness to kill and die, taught the necessity of invasion, and proved that there would be no easy victories.

No island worth taking was easier, quicker, or less destructive than expected and U.S. strategists were continually surprised and dismayed by the price that victory required each time. As each island turned out more fatal than the last, U.S. strategists looked fearfully towards the final islands in their leapfrogging chain, Kyushu and Honshu, the mothers of all Japanese islands. Although American objectives did not change, the questions about unconditional surrender grew more urgent with each island battle, the criticisms about U.S. strategies became more severe, and the tensions tightened between victory, time, and costs. Leapfrogging across the central and south Pacific saved lives on both sides and avoided gratuitous meatgrinders, but the terrible toll led U.S. strategists to look ever harder for solutions or silver bullets that would allow them to complete Japan’s defeat, hasten the end of the war, and lower its costs.⁷⁰

The American will to win was thus both challenged and reinforced by island-hopping experiences. Confronted with a fierce, fanatical enemy that refused to surrender, American strategists adopted extreme, fanatical measures themselves to force Japan’s defeat out of military

⁷⁰ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 76.

necessity. But Japanese resistance also aggravated American racism and revenge and gave U.S. strategists a moral justification for turning the Pacific into a “war without mercy.”⁷¹

BUNA BEACH

U.S. forces paid a heavy price for their island-hopping. Despite the successes, the Roosevelt administration had tried to match the public tolerance for American casualties by hiding them. Fearing that Americans would lose their commitment to total victory and unconditional surrender if they knew what it cost, the administration censored combat experiences for public consumption. After a powerful editorial from *Life* magazine in early 1943, however, the administration reversed course and began showing the brutal realities of combat in order to increase Americans’ tolerance for U.S. casualties.

Just as the Guadalcanal campaign was ending in February 1943, *Life* published photos by George Strock of the Battle of Buna in New Guinea which showed “the most intimate glimpses of the war thus far.”⁷² The story *Life* really wanted to tell about Buna, “How the Heroic Boys of Buna Drove the Japs into the Sea,” was published one week later. The article focused on Bill, a Wisconsin boy who, along with other average Americans, evicted the Japanese from New Guinea in “vicious Indian warfare.” *Life* described how the Japanese were not afraid to die and built pillboxes which could only be stormed by Bill and his mates who stalked and hunted Japanese in “the dark and nervous jungle.” Charging through the bush, Bill had chased the Japanese to the beach until “He felt a terrible blow on his heart that whirled him around. It knocked him flat on the beach, face down,

⁷¹ Dower, *War without Mercy*; Herring, *The American Century and Beyond, U.S. Foreign Relations, 1893-2015*, 292–93.

⁷² “The Battle of Buna,” *Life* 14, no. 7 (February 15, 1943): 17-29; “LIFE on the Newsfronts of the World,” *Life* 14, no. 8 (February 22, 1943): 24.

with his helmet on.” Strock photographed him there, half-buried in the sand and covered by the “soft white waves.”

But *Life* could not show Strock’s photograph of Bill or of any Americans who gave their lives in Buna. It was against Army policy to show dead Americans because the War Department feared that the images would demoralize the public and diminish popular support for the war effort.⁷³ “Maybe this is right,” *Life*’s editors wrote, “Certainly it would be a debasement of the high cause in which Bill died to indulge in morbid reflections about him.” And, of course, no American wanted to see his or her dead son or brother or friend exposed like that in a national magazine. “Nevertheless,” *Life* answered, “we think that occasional pictures of Americans who fall in action should be printed.” The job of photojournalists like Strock was “to bring the war back to us, so that we who are thousands of miles removed from the dangers and the smell of death may know what is at stake. We think Bill would want that.” If Americans could look at Bill resting in the sand, the editors speculated, politicians might curb their selfish interests, absentee workers might return to their posts, and housewives might not race to raid the grocery stores. “Why should the home front be coddled, wrapped up in cotton wool, protected from the shock of the fight? If Bill had the guts to take it, we ought to have the guts to look at it, face-to-face,” they opined. Many Americans agreed and called for more such pictures. “Maybe when they see what hell war can be,” one letter to the editor said, Americans would stop whining about gas rations at home.⁷⁴

The Battle of Buna and Strock’s photos proved that ordinary Americans could defeat the Japanese, but they would have to do it the hard way. *Life* noted that there were some things that only air power could accomplish, but “the final decision will go to ordinary Americans who have learned

⁷³ Brewer, *Why America Fights*, 99–100; George H. Roeder, *The Censored War: American Visual Experience during World War Two* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 16–17.

⁷⁴ “Letters to the Editors,” *Life* 14, no. 10 (March 8, 1943): 2.

how to use their ears, their eyes, their hands – and their guts. Modern inventions can supplement these primitive human facilities and greatly augment their power. But no invention can substitute, in the end, for Bill's two legs, or the courageous heart that got him out there to the beach." The moral of the story of Buna Bill, *Life* explained, was that "there is no fancy way around this war. There is no political trick or economic scheme that can make it easy. We have to take it on the chin. The pillboxes are right in front of us; we have to storm them. For this lesson, and for their superb achievement, we thank the boys of Buna."⁷⁵

Life's editors tried to illustrate the lessons of Buna for months as they petitioned U.S. military censors to release Strock's more graphic photographs. The Roosevelt administration worried, however, that if Americans could see the real costs of the war, they would stop supporting it. As U.S. forces continued to advance in North Africa and the Pacific in 1943 though, the administration became even more worried that propaganda and censorship had made Americans complacent and unwilling to see the war through to total victory and unconditional surrender. The government therefore believed that the country needed federal inspiration and intervention to raise their willingness to fight to the end. Accordingly, *Newsweek* was allowed to publish photographs of badly injured Americans in May 1943. The director of the Office of War Information (OWI), Elmer Davis, even threatened to resign unless the military allowed his office to show civilians what the war was really like. Roosevelt conceded and loosened the restrictions on graphic censorship in order to give the public a more explicit and realistic representation of U.S. soldiers on the battlefield and to prepare them for the higher casualties that the military expected. Such portrayals would also reduce domestic murmuring about minor inconveniences on the home front, officials reasoned.⁷⁶ The President tried to brace the country for the incoming images and echoed Joseph Grew's warnings

⁷⁵ "LIFE on the Newsfronts of the World," *Life* 14, no. 8 (February 22, 1943): 24.

⁷⁶ Roeder, *The Censored War*, 10.

about the Japanese in a speech to Congress on September 17, 1943. He explained, “We face, in the Orient, a long and difficult fight. We must be prepared for heavy losses in winning that fight. The power of Japan will not collapse until it has been literally pounded into the dust. It would be the utmost folly for us to try to pretend otherwise.”⁷⁷

Three days later, as the War Department’s Bureau of Public Relations released dozens of graphic photographs from the Office of Censorship’s “Chamber of Horrors” file at the Pentagon, *Life* finally was able to publish the photograph of Buna Bill. Strock’s photograph of three American soldiers lying half-buried on Buna beach was the first time that Americans were permitted to see their dead countrymen and *Life* issued an editorial that explained why looking at the dead was important.⁷⁸ “Here lie three Americans. What shall we say of them?” it began. “Shall we say that this is a noble sight? Shall we say that this is a fine thing, that they should give their lives for their country? Or shall we say that this is too horrible to look at? Why print this picture, anyway, of three American boys dead upon an alien shore? Is it to hurt people? To be morbid?” Again, the editors insisted that they “ought to be permitted to show a picture of Bill – not just the words, but the real thing. We said that if Bill had the guts to take it, then we ought to have the guts to look at it. Well, this is the picture.” President Roosevelt and Elmer Davis, had decided that “the American people ought to be able to see their own boys as they fall in battle; to come directly and without words into the presence of their own dead.” *Life* retold the story of how Bill and his companions died and tried to clarify what the sight meant: “here on the beach is America... three fragments of that life we call American life: three units of freedom.” The photograph showed three dead Americans, but it was freedom that had fallen. The editorial concluded: “America is the symbol of freedom... And all over

⁷⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Message to Congress on the Progress of the War,” September 17, 1943, APP.

⁷⁸ Even after the Office of Censorship was allowed to show American deaths, they could not show bloody deaths. In fact, the blood of an American soldier was not publicly seen until the spring of 1945 and even then, the face of the GI was blocked in Robert Capa’s photograph. Roeder, *The Censored War*, 1.

the world, now, there are living fragments of this symbol, and all over the world they are being shot down, like these fragments. And it is not an easy thing to understand why they are there, and why, if freedom is to live, they must be willing to die.”⁷⁹

Public reactions to the photograph were mixed. Nancy Scott from New York City called the photograph “the greatest picture that has come out of the war” while Richard Foss from Kenilworth, Illinois, called the picture “a terrible thing” although he was still glad that someone had “the courage to print it.” Lt. Clinton Kanaga in the Marine Corps Reserve complimented the magazine on bringing the war home: “the real and only heroes of this war are the fine American lads who have made the supreme sacrifice for freedom and their homes,” he wrote. At Camp Shelby in Mississippi, Pvt. Harry Nelson said the accompanying editorial was “the most inspiring thing I have read about the war.” Most soldiers did not know what they were fighting for, he admitted, and ordinary propaganda made them cynical, but “Three Americans” had given real meaning to the war. Lois Halsworth in New York City strongly protested, however: “The fundamental principle for which we are supposed to be fighting is the dignity of man,” she wrote. “Among man’s dignities few are greater than that of dying for his country. But pictures of mutilated corpses make a mockery of sacrifice.” She continued, “The War Department has made a grave mistake in permitting death to be held so cheap. LIFE has erred even more seriously in editorially masking morbid sensationalism with talk about the necessity of arousing people to the meaning of the war.”⁸⁰

Depictions of dead Americans became one of the government’s most powerful weapons in the struggle to maintain national morale and manage morality in World War II.⁸¹ Censorship had always attempted to deflate the war’s costly realities to meet the moral sentiments of the American

⁷⁹ “Three Americans,” *Life* 15, no. 12 (September 20, 1943): 34-35.

⁸⁰ “Letters to the Editors,” *Life* 15, no. 15 (October 11, 1943): 4, 6.

⁸¹ John McCallum, “U.S. Censorship, Violence, and Moral Judgement in a Wartime Democracy, 1941–1945,” *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 3 (June 1, 2017): 565.

people. But when public perceptions and attitudes seemed to fall short of the government's war aims, the Roosevelt administration released more graphic photographs to inflate public resolve to match the price of victory. The photographs from Buna Beach consecrated dying as a sacrificial act and made killing look like a noble deed in a great crusade. By showing and sanctifying dead Americans, the Roosevelt administration not only amplified national morale but enlarged Americans' tolerance for the human costs of war and their willingness to pursue victory at any cost.

TARAWA

Some commentators continued to doubt, however, whether their country had the stomach for total victory. Robert Sherrod, an associate editor for *Time* magazine who accompanied the Marine invasion of the Tarawa atoll in the Gilbert Islands, wondered if Americans had “grown too soft to fight a war.” He knew that some U.S. outfits had threatened to desert and an army general in Brisbane had told him, “I’m afraid the Americans of this generation are not the same kind of Americans who fought the last war.” Sherrod shared his worries. “I knew we could make the machines of war,” he explained, “But I didn’t know whether we had the heart to fight a war.” American soldiers seemed to believe that “peace was more important than honor” and most “just wanted to go home.”⁸² The Japanese had also augmented Tarawa’s natural reef, sand bars, and coral heads with tank and boat obstructions, barbed wire, machine-gun nests, trenches, pillboxes, and blockhouses. The *New York Times*’ military editor, Hanson W. Baldwin, later reported that Tarawa’s defenses were “the most skillfully constructed, the most complete and the strongest” that U.S. forces had yet encountered and that “Tarawa, per square yard of surface, was probably more strongly held than any other single point” in the war thus far.⁸³ But by the second day of fighting in

⁸² Sherrod, *Tarawa: The Story of a Battle*, 32.

⁸³ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Pattern for Invasion Indicated,” *NYT*, February 23, 1944; see also *FRUS: Conference at Quebec, 1944*, no. 266.

November 1943, Sherrod rejoiced that “the Marines are not too soft to fight.” In spite of everything the Japanese threw at them, the Marines just kept coming and dug “the loathsome bugs” out of their fortifications.⁸⁴ “Bugs,” was his word for the Japanese.

The toll of Tarawa was terrible though – more than 1,000 dead and 2,000 wounded in just seventy-six hours – the bloodiest fight in Marine Corps history to that point. Sherrod was both awed and appalled by the carnage. “What I saw on Betio [Island] was, I am certain, one of the greatest works of devastation wrought by man,” he declared.⁸⁵ But although the battle dissolved his doubts about the toughness of U.S. soldiers, it raised new anxieties about the will to win on the home front. Sherrod was dismayed when he returned to the states and “found a nation wallowing in unprecedented prosperity” and he figured that “many Americans were not prepared psychologically to accept the cruel facts of war.”⁸⁶ The country balked at the lists of boys who were killed just weeks before Christmas and demanded answers from the military about Tarawa’s casualties. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox and Lt. Gen. Alexander A. Vandegrift defended the military’s planning although Vandegrift warned that low-cost victories were over.⁸⁷

The public reactions to Tarawa apparently worried the Roosevelt administration more than the island’s actual costs and national correspondents and U.S. strategists used the experience of Tarawa to inflate Americans’ willingness to pay the human costs required by total victory. Sherrod warned that if Americans were not willing to do whatever it took to win, they risked losing the war altogether since the Japanese strategy was “to burrow into the ground as far and as securely as possible, waiting for the Americans to dig them out; then to hope that the Americans would grow

⁸⁴ Sherrod, *Tarawa: The Story of a Battle*, 99, 139.

⁸⁵ Sherrod, 123.

⁸⁶ Sherrod, 151.

⁸⁷ “Navy’s Tarawa Job Defended by Knox,” *NYT*, December 4, 1943; “Vandegrift Backs Method at Tarawa,” *NYT*, December 18, 1943.

sick of their own losses before completing the job.” Sherrod felt that Americans who criticized the battle were “playing into Japanese hands” since “there was no way to defeat the Japanese except by extermination.” Did they not realize that “there would be many other bigger and bloodier Tarawas in the three or four years of Japanese war following the first Tarawa?”⁸⁸ Total victory would obviously cost a lot of American lives, but that was simply the price of winning. There was no other way. Sherrod explained in the racist language of an unlimited war:

We are winning, but we’ve still got to dig out every last Jap from every last pillbox, and that will cost us a lot of Marines. I reflect: isn’t that true of our whole war against the Japs? They haven’t got a chance and they know it, unless we get fainthearted and agree to some kind of peace with them. But, in an effort to make us grow sick of our losses, they will hang on under their fortifications, like so many bedbugs. They don’t care how many men *they* lose – human life being a minor consideration to them. The Japs’ only chance is our getting soft, as they predicted their whole war on our being too luxury-loving to fight.⁸⁹

Tarawa thus reinforced the need for an unlimited war. Maj. Gen. Holland Smith compared Tarawa to Pickett’s Charge at the Battle of Gettysburg and when correspondents asked him what it was that finally made it possible for American forces to take an island that the Japanese claimed was impregnable, he responded: “there is only one answer to that. It was willingness to die.”⁹⁰ That willingness cut both ways since the Japanese were also willing to die although the *New York Herald Tribune* tried to differentiate between the “primitive” piety of the Japanese – like “a dog to its master” – and the Americans’ ideological devotion to liberty, their “consuming hatred of the dog-master relationship” and their “passionate attachment” to the dignity of free human beings.⁹¹ Still, as the *New York Times* observed, Japan’s refusal to surrender and determination to fight to the death

⁸⁸ Sherrod, *Tarawa: The Story of a Battle*, 149.

⁸⁹ Sherrod, 99.

⁹⁰ George F. Horne, “Tarawa’s Captor Reviews Victory,” *NYT*, November 30, 1943; “Their Willingness to Die,” *New York Herald Tribune*, December 1, 1943.

⁹¹ “Their Willingness to Die,” *New York Herald Tribune*, December 1, 1943.

made the Pacific War “a war of extermination in which there is virtually no quarter” and so the war would have to be fought “in the frontier manner.”⁹²

Island-hopping also proved that the U.S. could only defeat Japan through costly invasions all the way to the home islands. After the terrible victory on Tarawa, the *New York Times* wrote: “in order to crush Japan and get to Tokyo... we must send into Japan herself an invasion force strong enough to cope with the last desperate resistance.”⁹³ Sherrod similarly criticized the “wishful thinking” and comforting “yarns” that presumed that Japan could simply be bombed into surrender. “It seemed to many that machines alone would win the war for us, perhaps with the loss of only a few pilots,” he wrote, but Sherrod predicted that “the road to Tokyo would be lined with the grave of many a foot soldier,” and “no amount of shelling and bombing could obviate the necessity of sending in foot soldiers to finish the job.”⁹⁴ In February 1944, several months after Tarawa, Hanson W. Baldwin likewise condemned “air zealots” for overestimating air power. Air forces certainly possessed tactical mobility, speed, and surprise, and they could bypass terrain and water barriers that had limited armies and navies for centuries and carry the war to the heart of the enemy. But they could not cover an area continuously and they were still affected by weather, darkness, and distance. Unlike armies, they could not seize or hold ground and, because they could not supply their own needs, they relied on trucks, trains, and freighters for strategic mobility. Baldwin therefore insisted that air power could not “win the victory alone” and that armies and navies were still the primary means for winning the war.⁹⁵

⁹² “The Lesson Of Tarawa,” *NYT*, December 1, 1943.

⁹³ “The Lesson Of Tarawa,” *NYT*, December 1, 1943.

⁹⁴ Sherrod, *Tarawa: The Story of a Battle*, 148–49.

⁹⁵ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Air Power’s Limitations,” *NYT*, February 17, 1944; Hanson W. Baldwin, “Air Lesson in Italy,” *NYT*, February 18, 1944.

Island-hopping also destroyed the hopes for easy victory. Many Americans, Sherrod concluded, expected nothing less than an easy war, but the corollary of invasion was that “there is no easy way to win the war; there is no panacea which will prevent men from getting killed.”⁹⁶ The *New York Times* likewise concluded that Americans could no longer think of Japan as a “third-rate Power” and that there was no easy way to defeat the Japanese. “the time has come,” the *Times* wrote, “to steel ourselves against the day when far bigger and far more costly battles will have to be fought in the Pacific than any we have known heretofore, and to prepare for them.”⁹⁷

As the Roosevelt administration looked ahead to the invasion of Fortress Europe the following summer, the president and his advisors likewise wanted Americans to give up the idea that victory would be easy, quick, or cheap. Just as the administration had approved the release of Geroche Strock’s photo from Buna Beach to bring the realities of the war home in order to inflate public resolve to match the price of victory, the President authorized the release of *With the Marines at Tarawa* after talking to Robert Sherrod. The nineteen-minute documentary of the battle which was released in March 1944, showed graphic scenes of American and Japanese dead but explained that “This is the price we have to pay for a war we didn’t want” and warned that there would be more dead on more battlefields before it was all over. By including distressing scenes of dead marines floating in the surf, officials hoped Americans would abandon hopes for bloodless victory and that when the public realized what victory would cost, they would give more support (not less) to government programs.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Sherrod, *Tarawa: The Story of a Battle*, 148–49.

⁹⁷ “The Lesson Of Tarawa,” *NYT*, December 1, 1943.

⁹⁸ DOD, Department of the Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, *With the Marines at Tarawa* (Warner Brothers Pictures, 1944), 19:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JolhiCbU_u8; John H. Crider, “Government Seeks Stern Home Front,” *NYT*, December 23, 1943.

The *New York Times* hoped that American losses were not disproportionate to the value of the island, but the newspaper, Robert Sherrod, and administration officials all accepted the casualties and rejected the idea of an easy war and the possibility of shortcuts or silver bullets.⁹⁹ The only way to win was to pay the price of victory.

In the Pacific, the willingness to die and the willingness to kill were both part of the same all-out moral attitude that drove the United States towards total victory and total war and American strategists came to view extermination and sacrifice as military necessities – the only way to force Japan’s defeat and end their resistance. As long as the United States kept making measurable progress towards victory, however, the war effort would survive any moral criticism. Because, in World War II, victory was invaluable. Of course, U.S. strategists wanted to win decisively, quickly, and cheaply, but when they had to choose, they opted for total victory. Peace through victory proved to be more important than an armistice, it was more important than shortening the war, it was even more important than saving American lives. The value of unconditional surrender expanded Americans’ tolerance for killing and dying which made the Pacific War not only a “war without mercy,” but a war without cost.

GAS TABOO

The war was not completely unlimited, however. As their tolerance for killing and dying increased, military and political officials began calling for unconventional warfare including chemical and biological warfare. But in spite of the exigencies or expediencies of the war, American experiments with chemical and biological warfare were restrained. This does not mean, of course, that the United States did not use chemical weapons during the war. The Chemical Warfare Service developed a chemical mortar, generators for smoke screening, flame throwers, and incendiary

⁹⁹ “The Lesson Of Tarawa,” *NYT*, December 1, 1943.

bombs which were used to devastating effect in the Pacific. In fact, the Army's history of the Chemical Warfare Service suggested that "Aerial incendiaries probably caused as much death and destruction as any other weapon used in World War II."¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, moral revulsion caused U.S. strategists to ultimately reject gas and biological warfare against Germany and Japan.

The moral taboo and legal conventions against gas warfare grew out of the experiences of World War I which left deep psychological scars. Civilized nations had discouraged poisons in warfare for centuries but, in April 1915, the Germans began using gas at Ypres.¹⁰¹ Although the international community condemned gas warfare, its use compelled the Allies to protect their own soldiers and to produce their own gas munitions which U.S. forces used in France in 1918. International agreements and laws soon reflected the popular outrage against gas warfare. When the Central Powers signed peace treaties ending the war, all of the settlements included a clause prohibiting the use, manufacture, and importation of "asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases and all analogous liquids, materials or devices."¹⁰² In 1921, the Conference on the Limitation of Armament in Washington noted that using toxic gases in warfare had been condemned by world opinion and prohibited in many treaties. The conference, therefore, accepted the prohibition as international law which bound "the conscience and practice of nations."¹⁰³ At the 1925 Geneva Conference, the U.S. delegation introduced and signed a prohibition against the use of toxic agents and biological methods in war although the U.S. Senate refused to ratify the treaty. Nevertheless, by the time the

¹⁰⁰ Brooks E. Kleber and Dale Birdsell, *The Chemical Warfare Service: Chemicals in Combat* (Washington D. C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1990 [1966]), 614.

¹⁰¹ For international restrictions on poisons and toxic gases see Hugo Grotius, *De Jure Belli ac Pacis Libri Tres*, Francis W. Kelsey, Trans. (Clark, NJ: Lawbook Exchange, Ltd., 2021 [1925]); "Declaration on the Use of Projectiles the Object of Which is the Diffusion of Asphyxiating or Deleterious Gases; July 29, 1899;" Lillian Goldman Law Library, *Avalon Project - Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*.

¹⁰² *FRUS, The Paris Peace Conference*, vol. XIII, Chapter II. – Armament, munitions and material (Art. 164 to 172); Leo P. Brophy and George J. B. Fisher, *The Chemical Warfare Service: Organizing for War* (Washington, D. C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1989 [1959]), 3-19.

¹⁰³ *FRUS, 1922*, vol. I, Unperfected Treaty No. R-6.

United States entered World War II, the Geneva Gas Protocol had been signed by forty-two nations and had become the most widely accepted expression of international views on gas warfare.¹⁰⁴

Despite public revulsion and the legal prohibitions against gas warfare, the risk and fear of gas attacks led Congress to retain the Chemical Warfare Service (CWS) as part of the army to maintain American capabilities for gas defense and retaliation.¹⁰⁵ Consequently, the CWS budget increased from \$1.5 million and 500 personnel in the 1930s to \$1 billion and more than 60,000 employees in 1942.¹⁰⁶ But military authorities remained unconvinced of the effectiveness of gas. The Navy and Army Air Force did not think gas was as effective as bombardment while the killer concentration of gas necessary to affect large cities posed huge logistical challenges.¹⁰⁷ Besides the obvious meteorological problems (wind), Col. Joaquin E. Zanetti, a CWS reserve officer and chemistry professor at Columbia University, also estimated that the costs to attacking planes would not be worth the benefit and claimed it would be “inconceivable that a military leader would risk a sufficiently great fleet to inundate a city with gas.” Military officials seemed to agree that “noncombatants in cities should fear high explosives most, incendiary bombs next, and last and least gas.” But gas was “the best advertised of all weapons” and most civilians remained terrified of it. Even before World War II broke out, European cities began to make defensive gas preparations by distributing masks and handbooks, arming sirens, and constructing underground shelters.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ “No. 2138 – Germany, United States of America, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, etc.,” *League of Nations Treaty Series* 94, nos. 1-4 (1929): 65-74; Brophy and Fisher, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, 20-21.

¹⁰⁵ Brophy and Fisher, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, ix, 21; Kleber and Birdsell, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, 239-241.

¹⁰⁶ Barton J. Bernstein, “Why We Didn’t Use Poison Gas in World War II,” *American Heritage* 36, no. 5 (August/September 1985): 40.

¹⁰⁷ Bernstein, 40.

¹⁰⁸ Waldemar Kaempffert, “Gas Over Europe – How Real Is The Danger?” *The New York Times Magazine* (October 10, 1937): 10, 19.

Meanwhile, U.S. presidents continually opposed gas as a military weapon. When Congress tried to change the Chemical Warfare Service to the Chemical Corps in 1937, President Roosevelt vetoed the bill. In a letter to the Senate on August 4, the president stated, “It has been and is the policy of this Government to do everything in its power to outlaw the use of chemicals in warfare. Such use is inhuman and contrary to what modern civilization should stand for.” Roosevelt wanted to do all he could “to discourage the use of gases and other chemicals in any war between nations.” Although he acknowledged that “defensive necessities” required the military to study the use of chemicals in warfare, he did not want the government to make any special or permanent organization to engage in those studies and he refused even to “dignify” the service by calling it the “Chemical Corps.” In fact, he hoped that one day the Chemical Warfare Service would be “entirely abolished.”¹⁰⁹

Secretary of State Cordell Hull shared the president’s sentiments. After the United States entered World War II, he talked to Secretary of War Henry Stimson a month after Pearl Harbor about issuing a unilateral declaration that the U.S. would observe the Geneva Gas Protocol. Stimson, however, thought such a statement would provoke public debates on moral and political issues that would delay gas production and indicate American weakness. Moreover, the War Department regarded the fear of retaliation as “the only effective deterrent to gas warfare.” Stimson therefore argued that “our most effective weapon on this subject at the present time is to keep our mouths tight shut.”¹¹⁰

The war gave the United States plenty of pretexts to use gas if U.S. strategists had wanted to, but the Roosevelt administration justified gas only in retaliation. At the beginning of June 1942, for

¹⁰⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Letter to the Senate on Chemicals in Warfare,” August 4, 1937, APP; Brophy and Fisher, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, 22.

¹¹⁰ Brophy and Fisher, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, 49-50; Bernstein, “Why We Didn’t Use Poison Gas in World War II,” 40.

instance, the State Department received reports that the Japanese had used poison gas in recent attacks against China. The Japanese had used gas the year before and the Chinese now feared further large-scale gas attacks and asked the Roosevelt administration to threaten retaliation if Japan continued to use gas.¹¹¹ The administration largely saw these incidents as decisions by local commanders in the field, not as examples of Japanese policy but the president announced on June 5 that “if Japan persists in this inhuman form of warfare against China or any other of the United Nations” the U.S. would regard the use of gas as attacks against the U.S. and would retaliate “in kind and in full measure” in “complete retribution.”¹¹²

Gradually, the War Department came to believe that Germany and Japan would resort to gas warfare against the U.S. sooner or later and cables in November 1942 suggested it might be sooner with Germany. General Marshall did not want the army to suffer a chemical Pearl Harbor and military strategists concluded that the U.S. should beat Germany at its own game (like the atomic bombs).¹¹³ In April 1943, after receiving reports that Germany was preparing to use poison gas against the Soviet Union, the British warned that if Germany used gas, His Majesty’s government would retaliate in kind. The British suggested that the U.S. make a similar announcement and eventually, on June 8, 1943, President Roosevelt issued a firm statement against the use of poison gas. Roosevelt was loathe to believe that any nation, even bad eggs like Germany and Japan, “could or would be willing to loose upon mankind such terrible and inhumane weapons.” Yet increasing reports suggested that the Axis powers were indeed preparing to use weapons which had been “outlawed by the general opinion of civilized mankind.” Roosevelt affirmed though that the United States had not used poison gas and he hoped that the U.S. would never have to. In fact, he

¹¹¹ *FRUS, 1942, China*, no. 73.

¹¹² Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Statement on Japanese Use of Poison Gas,” June 5, 1942, APP; Bernstein, “Why We didn’t Use Poison Gas in World War II,” 40.

¹¹³ Brophy and Fisher, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, 54, 59.

categorically stated that “we shall under no circumstances resort to the use of such weapons unless they are first used by our enemies.” But he warned that if Germany or Japan resorted to “such desperate and barbarous methods” against any of the United Nations, the U.S. would regard the attacks as assaults against the United States and the president promised “full and swift retaliation in kind” in response to such crimes.¹¹⁴

On September 7, 1943, Roosevelt and Churchill signed a similar draft declaration when it appeared that Germany might use gas against Italy. Churchill had forwarded information to Roosevelt the previous month claiming that Germany had threatened to use poison gas if the Italians stopped their resistance and surrendered to the Allies.¹¹⁵ The following month, General Eisenhower gave similar indications and the Combined Chiefs recommended that the Allies issue a “special warning” to Germany about how the Allies would retaliate.¹¹⁶ Roosevelt and Churchill then signed a draft declaration which stated that “the use of poison gas against the Italians [would] call forth immediate retaliation upon Germany with gas.”¹¹⁷

The American warnings to Germany and Japan clearly showed that U.S. strategists opposed gas warfare on moral grounds. President Roosevelt strongly believed that gas in warfare was wrong and that no one should use it. But in this total war, U.S. strategists felt that the only effective deterrent to unconventional and immoral attacks was the threat of retaliation and they were willing to justify gas warfare if the other side used it first. American views on gas changed, however, as the Pacific War worsened.

¹¹⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Statement Warning the Axis Against Using Poison Gas,” June 8, 1943, APP; *FRUS, 1943, General*, vol. 1, nos. 414, 416-417.

¹¹⁵ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 300.

¹¹⁶ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 591.

¹¹⁷ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 594.

In November 1943, the United States suffered 3,400 casualties in four days at Tarawa in the Central Pacific. After the battle, the CWS chief, Maj. Gen. William N. Porter, begged his superiors to authorize gas. He argued that the U.S. faced no threat of reprisals because of its air superiority and gas could shorten the war and save American lives. The vast majority of Americans still opposed gas, but some newspapers agreed.¹¹⁸

Ernest K. Lindley argued in *Newsweek* that the U.S. could have captured Tarawa “almost without a casualty” if the military had used gas. Nearly every Japanese soldier was killed or committed suicide anyway, he reasoned, while the U.S. lost several thousand “valiant youth.” If the Japanese were going to die anyway, why not use gas to achieve the same result and save American lives? The United States was not bound by international convention, like Great Britain and Germany, to not use gas, and the Pacific islands were ideal for gas warfare which could save time and casualties. Lindley also pointed out that everyone used gas in World War I, but no one was using it in World War II because everyone considered gas inhumane. Neither side was hesitating to use ever-deadlier explosives, though, and “The dead are no less dead because they are killed by explosives instead of gas.” In other words, Lindley suggested that all weapons were morally equal and, therefore, it should not matter what means the U.S. employed to defeat Japan. The United States could not make the war any more humane or ethical by choosing to kill with different weapons; however, it could make the war less immoral by saving American lives which, he contended, was a higher moral value than not using gas. “To our enemies this is a war of survival or extermination, or was so long as they had a prospect of victory. Are we fighting it as such?” he asked. “Or are we, by an anachronistic devotion to the code of the duel, committing thousands of

¹¹⁸ Bernstein, “Why We Didn’t Use Poison Gas in World War II,” 40-41.

our bravest youth to avoidable death?” Lindley thus argued that by being fair to Japan and not using gas, the United States was being unfair to its own soldiers and sacrificing their lives needlessly.¹¹⁹

Gas apparently became even less repulsive in January 1944 after Washington revealed details of more Japanese atrocities. The *New York Times*' military editor, Hanson W. Baldwin, suggested that the reports would further harden American hearts and result in “less moral repugnance than ever before” against the use of weapons and means that the U.S. had hitherto resisted, like gas. Baldwin argued that gas was “greatly overrated by the lay mind as an effective military tactic” and that average Americans “wrongly ascribe[d] to it alone a peculiar moral malignancy” which should have been shared by bombs, torpedoes, and other weapons. But if U.S. commanders did think that gas would be militarily useful in the Pacific, “there would probably be far less compunction about its use, on the part of the American public today.” In short, Baldwin wrote that “the Pacific war is becoming more and more... a ‘no-quarter’ war, in which no holds will be barred.” He acknowledged that the Pacific was already a war without mercy in many places, but if the U.S. decided not to use gas, it would be because of military expediency, not because of the moral sentiments of the American people.¹²⁰

By 1945, the commitment to maximum effort, the disregard for Japanese lives and concern for American lives, and the increasing barbarism of the Pacific War encouraged U.S. strategists to cross moral lines and pursue a more unlimited war. With Germany defeated and casualties in the Pacific rising, the army began to reconsider the existing policy of only using gas in retaliation in favor of gassing the Japanese.¹²¹ As U.S. strategists prepared for an invasion of the home islands, some military officials favored gas warfare for both strategic and moral reasons. Gas could be

¹¹⁹ Ernest K. Lindley, “Thoughts on the Use of Gas in Warfare,” *Newsweek* 22, no. 25 (December 20, 1943): 24.

¹²⁰ Hanson W. Baldwin, “A War Without Quarter Forecast in Pacific,” *NYT*, January 30, 1944.

¹²¹ Craig M. Cameron, “Fanaticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941-1945” in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 56.

extremely effective against Japan because of the meteorological conditions there, some argued. Others were so alarmed by the casualties on Iwo Jima and Okinawa that the War Department investigated every means that could shorten the war and save American lives. Generals Douglas MacArthur, Joseph Stilwell and William A. Borden thought gas would make an invasion easier. The week after Germany's surrender, Borden called a meeting of army officials from intelligence, logistics, ordnance, engineers, Army Service Forces, and the Chemical Warfare Service to discuss Stilwell's recommendations and how to overcome Japanese resistance in bunkers, caves, and pillboxes. Afterwards, the CWS set up a project known as SPHINX which studied the logistics of gas warfare and concluded that gas was the best weapon the United States had against cave defenses.¹²²

On May 29, 1945, General Marshall and Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy talked about how to defeat Japan and save American lives. Marshall wanted to avoid the attrition that the U.S. was suffering from Japan's fanatical defense, and he thought the U.S. might have to try new tactics. Perhaps the U.S. could use gas on a limited scale, he suggested. They would not have to use the newest or most potent gas, "just drench them and sicken them so that the fight would be taken out of them." He opposed the immorality of gas and acknowledged that the army and the administration would have to deal with public fallout, but Marshall believed saving American lives was a more important moral goal. He also contended that gas was no less humane than the phosphorous and flame throwers that the U.S. was using in the Pacific or the incendiary bombs that were scorching Japan. And gas did not need to be used against urban centers or civilians, just against the last pockets of Japanese resistance.¹²³

¹²² Brophy and Fisher, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, 86-87; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 181.

¹²³ "5-147 Memorandum of Conversation, May 29, 1945," GCMF; Bernstein, "Why We Didn't Use Poison Gas in World War II," 41-43; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 181.

Just one week later, in June 1945, the Operations and Planning Division (OPD) determined in a study that gas warfare would give potency to the U.S. invasion and save American lives. At the same time, gas might provoke Japanese retaliations against China, and the study admitted that gas would cross a serious moral Rubicon and incur the world's wrath, especially after President Roosevelt had publicly denounced the offensive use of gas. Nevertheless, the study figured that chemical and biological weapons would be used against America in the next war anyway and public opinion could be educated to support gas warfare.¹²⁴

As the discussions of gas reached the Joint Chiefs, General Marshall forwarded recommendations from the OPD that the Chiefs talk with President Truman about initiating gas warfare. But Admiral Leahy opposed gas on moral grounds and felt that Roosevelt's statement in 1943 had resolved the issue while Marshall only thought that gas would be useful, not necessary.¹²⁵ Ultimately, the Joint Chiefs never decided to use gas, but they did consider employing biological or chemical agents to destroy Japanese crops. Stimson's staff had requested a legal opinion on this idea in January 1945 and the National Academy of Sciences and the U.S. Biological Warfare Committee urged Stimson to approve chemicals which would have been catastrophic in Japan considering the famine conditions there in the winter of 1945.¹²⁶

In the end, the United States fought a nearly unlimited war against Germany and Japan, was willing to use incendiary and atomic bombs against civilians, and was prepared to defend against and retaliate with gas warfare, but the U.S. never used gas or biological weapons in World War II. International law did not prohibit the U.S. from using gas since the Senate never ratified the 1925 Geneva Gas Protocol and wartime expediencies certainly gave the U.S. compelling strategic reasons

¹²⁴ Brophy and Fisher, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, 87; Bernstein, "Why We Didn't Use Poison Gas in World War II," 43.

¹²⁵ Brophy and Fisher, 86-88; Bernstein, 43-44.

¹²⁶ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 181.

to use gas. But by the time the United States was prepared to use gas, it did not seem necessary since “The war was being won without it.” U.S. strategists gave gas the greatest consideration as they prepared for an invasion of Japan, but gas did not have many friends in high places. Although Congress, chemical industries, and civil servants supported a permanent Chemical Warfare Service, the army did not, and top commanders never placed much faith in gas warfare. Ultimately, the responsibility for not using gas, like the responsibility for using the atomic bombs, lay with the president, and every U.S. president between World War I and World War II believed that gas was immoral. President Roosevelt denounced gas in 1943 and his statement largely neutralized the political support for gas. In 1945, when Truman could have changed Roosevelt’s policy on offensive gas he decided not to.¹²⁷ Primarily then, the U.S. did not use gas because of moral restraints. Roosevelt’s statement that the U.S. would only use gas in retaliation became military policy throughout the war, and military leaders were already reluctant to use gas because of the experiences of World War I. Those experiences had also given gas a bad reputation among Americans who mostly thought of gas as an unconventional, illegal, and immoral tactic. The moral justification for using gas also never materialized. Since no one else used it against American forces the U.S. never had a need to retaliate.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Bernstein, “Why We Didn’t Use Poison Gas in World War II,” 40, 44.

¹²⁸ Kleber and Birdsell, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, 652-654.

Strategic Bombing

OPERATION MEETINGHOUSE

X marks the spot. As American B-29 bombers approached the Japanese capital on March 9, 1945, their crews spotted an enormous flaming cross – ignited by pathfinders in advance to mark the target area. Lit by the burning “X”, the attack zone for Operation Meetinghouse #2 covered six industrial targets, smaller factories, railroad yards, and home industries, but the primary target was the urban area of Tokyo.

As the capital of the Japanese empire, Tokyo was the center of Japanese government, industry, commerce, and the headquarters of Japan’s war machine. It was also filled with people. With over seven million inhabitants, Tokyo was one of the three largest cities in the world and, although official U.S. reports did not explicitly mark civilians for indiscriminate annihilation, that certainly was not clear to Tokyo residents. All mission targets on March 9-10 were part of one of the most densely populated areas in the world: a three by four square mile area that was home to 750,000 people – the Asakusa Ku district alone contained 135,000 inhabitants per square mile. To destroy their targets, U.S. operations analysts and intelligence officers had planned massive conflagrations to jump the fire breaks around factories, overwhelm Tokyo’s fire defenses, and burn uncontrollably throughout the city.¹ In fact, an Air Intelligence Report noted that the attack meant “To burn down as much as possible of Tokyo’s industrial and urban area.”²

Once they were over the target area, the fleet of almost 300 bombers from the 73rd, 313th, and 314th Bombardment Wings aimed at the “X” and dropped 1,665 tons of incendiary bombs on

¹ 21st Bomber Command Tactical Mission Report 40, JAR; Seth Paridon, “Hellfire on Earth: Operation MEETINGHOUSE,” March 8, 2020, The National World War II Museum; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II: Bombs, Cities, Civilians, and Oil*, 174-176.

² *Air Intelligence Report 1*, no. 2 (March 15, 1945): 12, JAR.

the city. They could not miss. Because of radical new tactics ordered by Maj. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, the bombers had flown in at astonishingly low altitudes, between 4,900 and 9,200 feet over the city.³

At ground zero the city's air raid sirens had begun wailing around 10:30 PM, but few Japanese left their homes. Watchers along the coast and fire wardens like Yoshiharu Matsue heard the approaching bombers close to midnight but could not identify them by the sound of their engines because they came in so low.⁴ By the time they finally reported the impending attack it was too late to stop U.S. forces from unleashing "hellfire on earth."⁵

Not that warnings would have saved the city. Conditions in Tokyo were dry, and the city only had 8,000 firemen equipped with just three extension ladders. The capital also did not have any air raid shelters because the government did not want to risk public morale by indicating that Tokyo could, in fact, be bombed.⁶

Tokyo had been bombed before – in April 1942, twelve B-25 bombers had hit the capital as part of the famous Doolittle Raid, while more recently, Operation Meetinghouse #1 had struck Tokyo's urban area on February 25, and B-29s had targeted the Nakajima aircraft plant in the city on March 4, just five days earlier.⁷ But the night, the low-flying bombers, and their firebombs made the raid on March 9-10 different and unbearably more dreadful.

"The raid was totally indiscriminate," the fire-warden Matsue recalled. From the bellies of the bombers, thousands of M-69 cluster bombs fell to earth and "burst in midair... [bathing] everything below in flames."⁸ Out of the incendiaries there exploded an unquenchable fire – napalm.

³ "21st Bomber Command Tactical Mission Report 40," JAR.

⁴ Youth Division of Soka Gakkai, *Cries for Peace: Air Raid Survivor Accounts* (Tokyo: Japan Times, 1978), 100, JAR.

⁵ Paridon, "Hellfire on Earth."

⁶ Paridon.

⁷ List of Tactical Mission Reports, JAR.

⁸ Youth Division of Soka Gakkai, *Cries for Peace*, 100-101.

The burning jelly torched everything it touched and neither water nor suffocation with quilts, nothing, could extinguish the flames which made death by napalm an especially excruciating, fiery fate for thousands of Japanese.

Nisaku Kokubu had put up his blackout curtains when he heard the air-raid sirens but then returned to his work at the rationing office. At midnight, he heard the bombers and suddenly, around the edges of the curtains, “we could see a light almost as bright as day,” he recalled. Hurrying outside, he saw planes dropping sheets of firebombs and two or three doors away, a house took a direct hit and burst into flames. Nisaku went to help but then a bomb fell in his own yard and flames quickly engulfed the entire neighborhood. As fast as they could, he and his wife packed a small cart and led their four children into the streets.⁹

An hour after the first fires, the flames spread beyond the target area (as intended) and created a mammoth firestorm that swept the city. Japanese citizens ran in panic to find any kind of refuge from the flames and the unearthly heat. Tomio Yoshida and his sister encouraged each other to “endure the heat” as they fled but no one could survive such temperatures which reportedly reached 1,800 degrees. A kind person tried to protect them by pitifully scooping canal water in a tin can and pouring it on their heads, but the best chance to survive was to run.¹⁰

When incendiaries first began raining down, Aiko Matani’s family took up their fire-fighting posts, but her father soon ordered everyone to evacuate. They fled to the appointed safety zone at a nearby school and rushed into an auditorium packed with refugees. Soon, the doors were closed and “Steeling our hearts against pity,” everyone outside was shut out no matter how much they pleaded and screamed. Inside, men pushed straw mats against the windows to keep the flames out but

⁹ Youth Division of Soka Gakkai, 118-119.

¹⁰ Youth Division of Soka Gakkai, 102.

suddenly “fire shot up on all sides” when an incendiary made a direct hit on the school. Everyone fled but Aiko wrote that “we could only hurl ourselves from the flames roaring inside into others roaring outside.” Making a break for a nearby park, she saw a woman with flaming hair rolling on the ground, a man tore the burning clothes from his body as he ran, while the firestorm hurled sheets of corrugated iron into the streets.¹¹

As Nisaku Kokubu’s family fled, fierce winds swept them off their feet and overturned their cart. Nisaku scooped up handfuls of rice and turned to find that his wife and the three children she had been holding or carrying had disappeared. With everything around them on fire and people flooding into the streets, Nisaku and his eighteen-year-old daughter could only join the stream of refugees and trudged helplessly “among the devouring flames and through the stench of the charred bodies scattered along the roads.” Father and daughter survived the night, but Nisaku never saw his wife and three children again.¹²

In some places the heat was so intense that the flames devoured the oxygen in the air so that those who were not scorched asphyxiated. Many people simply burst into flames. The heat liquified glass windows and then the firestorm blew the glass into the air where it fell like a Biblical punishment on their heads and continued to burn them. Instinctively, many people fled towards water in the Futaba school swimming pool, but the heat boiled the water out of the pool and then broiled the victims alive.¹³ For more than an hour, the American bombers “mercilessly hurled down their infernal incendiaries,” Nisaku Kokubu wrote, continuing their attacks with no restraint.¹⁴

¹¹ Youth Division of Soka Gakkai, 107-108.

¹² Youth Division of Soka Gakkai, 118-120.

¹³ Paridon, “Hellfire on Earth”; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 174-176.

¹⁴ Youth Division of Soka Gakkai, *Cries for Peace*, 120.

Above the inferno, the planes detached the American crews from the torment below, but even they were not beyond the reach of the firestorm. The heat and winds from the incendiaries created updrafts and turbulence that buffeted the bombers and lifted or dropped them 1,000 feet at a time; some aircraft were actually flipped in mid-air. Worst of all, the funeral pyres they had lit below blew back at them and crews were sickened by the stench of burning human flesh which filled their planes when the bomb doors opened. Many men put on oxygen masks to avoid vomiting and some of the aircraft and flight suits reeked for days after the raid.¹⁵ Circling above the burning city was General Thomas Power, who led the attack and watched the flames grow for two hours. The stoic commander later wrote that “there is no room for emotions in war,” but he confessed that he was overwhelmed by the hell he had released on Japan.¹⁶

After dropping their payloads, the bombers turned back toward the Pacific and the airfields on Guam, Saipan, and Tinian in the Marianas, but Tokyo burned for days. Corpses of men, women, and children covered the streets, but most were barely recognizable as human beings. Some had been turned into charcoal piles; in other cases, bodies had melted together in blackened heaps. Carcasses dammed the Sumida River.¹⁷ A Japanese soldier, Eiji Okugawa, remembered, “Everything was a scorched, pitted wasteland of ruins and charred bodies.”¹⁸

In a war characterized by staggering, epic events, the firebombing of Tokyo on March 9-10, 1945, must take its place alongside Auschwitz and Hiroshima as one of the terrible mass atrocities of World War II. Operation Meetinghouse was “the most destructive air attack in history” – resulting

¹⁵ Paridon, “Hellfire on Earth”; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 174-176.

¹⁶ Thomas S. Power, with Albert A. Arnheim, *Design for Survival* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1965), 28.

¹⁷ Paridon, “Hellfire on Earth”; Youth Division of Soka Gakkai, *Cries for Peace*, 102.

¹⁸ Youth Division of Soka Gakkai, *Cries for Peace*, 106.

in “more physical destruction and loss of life than any other single military action on record.”¹⁹

When the flames finally died down, sixteen square miles of Tokyo’s heart had been obliterated.

Eighteen percent of the industrial district and sixty-three percent of the commercial district had been vaporized. The residential district was gone.²⁰ A photograph of Tokyo the morning after the attack showed less than fifteen percent of the buildings in the incendiary zone still standing, “Beautiful!” the Air Intelligence Report declared.²¹ The raid halved Tokyo’s war-making capacity, left one million people homeless, and destroyed more than a quarter of a million buildings and homes. In a single night, American bombers killed between 90,000 and 110,00 Japanese men, women, and children – more than in either of the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima or Nagasaki.²² In terms of deaths and destruction, therefore, the attack on Tokyo was the atomic bomb before the atomic bombs.

By comparison, the Americans lost virtually nothing. The Roosevelt administration wanted to brace the country to endure the sacrifices of total war but, with U.S. air superiority against Japan, they did not have to. Of the 335 aircraft that had been airborne, 279 bombers had attacked the target, and just forty-two aircraft had been damaged by anti-aircraft or accident. The mission suffered a grand total of only fourteen losses: two planes had been shot down, five were ditched, and seven were lost for unknown reasons.²³ The attack on Tokyo had cost the United States 102 casualties, but in the business of war one American for one thousand Japanese seemed like a good price. The United States had destroyed the Japanese capital at basically no cost to themselves. In subsequent days and weeks in March, American bombers followed up the Tokyo raid with

¹⁹ United States, Army Air Forces, *Third Report of the Commanding General of the Army Air Forces to the Secretary of War, November 12, 1945* (Baltimore: Schneidereith & Sons, 1945), 37; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 370; Power, *Design for Survival*, 27.

²⁰ 21st Bomber Command Tactical Mission Report 40, JAR.

²¹ *Air Intelligence Report 1*, no. 2 (March 15, 1945): 13, JAR.

²² Paridon, “Hellfire on Earth.”

²³ List of Tactical Mission Reports, JAR; 21st Bomber Command Tactical Mission Report 40, JAR; *Air Intelligence Report 1*, no. 2 (March 15, 1945): 12, JAR.

firebombing attacks by night on Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe, and then Nagoya again. In fact, American forces would continue to firebomb Japanese cities until the very day of surrender in August – even after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Truly, with the bombing of Tokyo and other Japanese cities, American warfare had no limits.

FROM OUTRAGE TO ACCEPTANCE

The United States was not always so cold-blooded. Before Pearl Harbor, incensed Americans had condemned Germany and Japan for bombing civilians.²⁴ Roosevelt had been shocked by Japanese atrocities against China and some congressmen called for a full economic embargo against Japan during the 1930s. During the Pacific War, American propaganda highlighted Japanese outrages like the indiscriminate bombing of Chinchow in 1931 and Shanghai in 1932, the Rape of Nanking in 1937, and the “sneak attack” on Pearl Harbor. In part, American reactions reflected a sense of Western moral superiority but they also embodied a genuine belief that bombing civilian populations was uncivilized and immoral. After Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Roosevelt issued an appeal to both sides, as well as to Great Britain, France, and Italy, to refrain from bombing civilians. The President unequivocally condemned the “ruthless bombing” of civilians which had “sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman” and “shocked the conscience of humanity.” He warned that if nations resorted to the “inhuman barbarism” of bombing civilians, hundreds of thousands of innocent people would die. Roosevelt therefore called on every government in the war to publicly “affirm its determination that its armed forces shall in no event, and under no circumstances,” bombard civilians, with the understanding that “these same rules of warfare will be scrupulously observed by all of their opponents.”²⁵ Over the course of the

²⁴ Michael Bess, *Choices under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 8.

²⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “An Appeal to Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and Poland to Refrain from Air Bombing of Civilians,” September 1, 1939, APP. See also, Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Message to the President of

war, however, strategic bombing became normalized as a military strategy and moral stance. In spite of some fierce civilian opposition, just a few years after Germany and Japan's dastardly strikes, American forces bombed Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo and a hundred other cities.²⁶

Bombing Japan had always been part of the American strategy for winning the war because U.S. strategists believed it was instrumental to destroying Japan's capacity and will to resist and forcing its unconditional surrender. But there is no question that the moral dimensions of the Pacific War changed the moment American bombers began attacking Japanese cities and civilians which made the war more total, more unlimited, more destructive, and more ruthless. Indeed, more than anything else, attacks on Japanese civilians through strategic bombing, fire bombing, and atomic bombing, demonstrated America's commitment to victory and the willingness to pursue any means to achieve it. Today, when we think of how far the United States was willing to go to win the Pacific War and defeat Japan, we think of strategic bombing which represented the moment in the twentieth century when U.S. strategists were most tolerant of the human costs of war.

U.S. strategists accepted the morality or immorality of strategic bombing out of military necessity, judging that bombing could defeat Japan. Strategic bombing followed the strategic logic and military doctrine of air power which suggested that powerful air forces could defeat their enemies by destroying their capacity and will to fight, and winning the war as effectively and efficiently as possible seemed like the greatest good the United States could accomplish. But U.S. strategists also believed that bombing could achieve decisive victory in a shorter amount of time and at minimal cost in American lives. In other words, U.S. strategists thought of bombing as a silver bullet and presumed that the evils of killing civilians would be outweighed by the righteousness of

Poland on Bombing of Civilians," September 18, 1939; "Appeal to Russia and Finland to Stop Bombing Civilians," December 1, 1939, APP.

²⁶ Beatrice Trefalt, "Fanaticism, Japanese Soldiers and the Pacific War, 1937-1945" in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 35–36.

saving American lives. As General Henry “Hap” Arnold reported at the end of the war, “To defeat Japan speedily and with minimum loss of lives was the purpose uppermost in everyone’s mind.”²⁷ At the same time, American strategists were determined to exact revenge on Japan, and they accepted the evils of strategic bombing because of racism, revenge, and retribution which all fueled the willingness to annihilate the Japanese. In their bombing reports, American commanders frequently referred to raids as reprisals for Pearl Harbor and Japanese atrocities. Ultimately, their humanitarian concerns and commitments to the ethics of precision bombing were overcome by the desires for military effectiveness and total victory.

AIR POWER DOCTRINE

The major American bombing campaign of Japan was based on the military doctrines and moral principles of air power. Enchanted by visions of air forces flying over armies, trenches, battlefields, and cities to bomb the enemy into submission, military theorists devoted themselves to air power and bombing campaigns which seemed to promise decisive, quick, and cheap victories.²⁸ The idea of strategic air operations was to destroy the enemy’s capacity for making war by attacking strategic, economic, and psychological targets.²⁹ Air power theorists did not develop the idea of strategic bombing out of thin air, however, the idea was grounded in General William Tecumseh Sherman’s March to the Sea during the American Civil War. In 1864-1865, Sherman had paved the way for ultimate Union victory by destroying Southern railroads, mills, and barns, thereby destroying the Confederacy’s capacity to wage war.³⁰ But unlike bloody strategies of attrition or trench warfare,

²⁷ United States, Army Air Forces, *Third Report of the Commanding General of the Army Air Forces to the Secretary of War, November 12, 1945* (Baltimore: Schneidreith & Sons, 1945), 57.

²⁸ Kenneth P. Werrell, *Blankets of Fire: U.S. Bombers over Japan during World War II* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 224.

²⁹ Werrell, 2.

³⁰ Russell F. Weigley, “American Strategy from Its Beginnings through the First World War” in Paret, Craig, and Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 435–36.

strategic bombing seemed cleaner and less costly – “Here was war on the cheap, saving not only lives but money,” wrote Richard Overy.³¹ With the advent of airplanes at the beginning of the twentieth century, many military theorists imagined air power as a revolutionary killing stroke that could achieve decisive victories quickly and at minimal cost. In fact, some strategists believed air power would end warfare completely since no part of the battlefield would be safe any longer. The military revolution usually credited to the atomic bombs thus began fifty years earlier with air power. The doctrine’s ideas were always colored by science fiction though, and even before strategic bombing became possible, strategists and science fiction writers envisioned air ships raining down bombs from above and winning wars with a single blow. H. G. Wells, for example, foreshadowed much of the destruction of the Second World War in his 1908 book, *The War in the Air*.³² But even when experiences on the battlefield raised doubts about the capabilities of air power, no one could get over the idea of delivering a knock-out blow.³³

The First World War turned many of these prophets false since air power never achieved supremacy at Verdun or the Somme, but the experiences of trench warfare, attrition, and stalemate nevertheless increased the desire for decisive and less ruinous victories. For four long years mass armies collided on muddy, bloody battlefields, outcomes were decided by sheer numbers and willpower, and everywhere the triumph of victory was drowned out by its intolerable costs.³⁴ After World War I, strategists everywhere called for more military mobility. In Britain, Captain Basil H. Liddell Hart focused on out-maneuvering, out-flanking, and out-thinking the enemy at minimum risk and minimum cost.³⁵ But while army commanders called for small professional forces rather

³¹ Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 105.

³² David MacIsaac, “Voice from the Central Blue: The Air Power Theorists” in Paret, Craig, and Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 626–27; H. G. Wells, *The War in the Air: And Particularly How Mr. Bert Smallways Fared While It Lasted* (New York: Macmillan, 1908).

³³ Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 104–5.

³⁴ John Shy, “Jomini” in Paret, Craig, and Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 181.

³⁵ John Shy, “Jomini” in Paret, Craig, and Gilbert, 181.

than whole nations in arms and more flexible responses, air power theorists led by Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, and Billy Mitchell again projected and promoted fleets of airplanes outmaneuvering, out-flanking, and bombing enemy forces into surrender.

Giulio Douhet, the “Father of Airpower Doctrine,” was one of air power’s true believers. In his 1921 book, *The Command of the Air*, the Italian general hailed the aerial revolution:

Never before in all the history of humanity has there appeared a war arm which can be compared to the air arm. The difference between the stone thrown by primitive man and the projectile fired by the famous Bertha is simply a difference of performance, not of kind. Between primitive man and Krupp’s stretches a series of improvements in giving force to the propulsion of a projectile. ...But the aerial machine is not an improvement; it is something new...and it gives man possibilities he has never had before.³⁶

Douhet felt that air power made surface offensives impossible or at least irrelevant and he thought defense was futile because of the advantages in speed and elevation in air warfare.³⁷ In fact, he believed so much in the power of air raids that he predicted that the mere sight of airplanes would force surrender like a strategic checkmate:

What civil or military authority could keep order, public services functioning, and production going under such a threat? And even if a semblance of order was maintained and some work done, would not the sight of a single enemy plane be enough to stampede the population into panic? In short, normal life would be impossible in this constant nightmare of imminent death and destruction. ...A complete breakdown of the social structure cannot but take place in a country subjected to this kind of merciless pounding from the air. The time would soon come when, to put an end to horror and suffering, the people themselves, driven by the instinct of self-preservation, would rise up and demand an end to the war – this before their army and navy had time to mobilize at all!³⁸

Ideally then, airpower could achieve bloodless victories, but Douhet was no respecter of persons, and he made no distinction between combatants and non-combatants. “The battlefield can no longer be limited,” he wrote. “No longer can a line of demarcation be drawn between belligerents and nonbelligerents, because all citizens wherever they are can be victims of an enemy offensive.

³⁶ Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, trans. Dino Ferrari, Air University Press edition (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2019), 160.

³⁷ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 18.

³⁸ Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, 53.

There will be no place where life and work can go on in comparative safety and tranquility; the countinghouse will be just as exposed as the trench... imminent danger will hang over everyone and everything.”³⁹ In order to win, he insisted, a nation must be able and willing to bomb enemy populations, not just government and industry centers. If air forces could destroy the enemy’s morale, the government would have no choice but to sue for peace and Douhet anticipated that air attacks would utilize explosive, incendiary, and poison gas bombs to achieve their objectives.⁴⁰

Douhet admitted that air warfare would have chillingly revolutionary results, but he dismissed the moral critiques of air power:

It is useless to delude ourselves. All the restrictions, all the international agreements made during peacetime are fated to be swept away like dried leaves on the winds of war. A man who is fighting a life-and-death fight – as all wars are nowadays – has the right to use any means to keep his life. War means cannot be classified as human and inhuman. War will always be inhuman, and the means which are used in it cannot be classified as acceptable or not acceptable according to their efficacy, potentiality, or harmfulness to the enemy. The purpose of war is to harm the enemy as much as possible; and all means which contribute to this end will be employed, no matter what they are. He is a fool if not a patricide who would acquiesce in his country’s defeat rather than go against those formal agreements which do not limit the right to kill and destroy, but simply the ways of killing and destroying. The limitations applied to the so-called inhuman and atrocious means of war are nothing but international demagogic hypocrisies.⁴¹

THE BOMBER MAFIA

In the United States, everyone talked about Douhet but they read his disciple, William “Billy” Mitchell, who fathered the U.S. Air Force.⁴² During World War I, Mitchell commanded all

³⁹ Douhet, 160.

⁴⁰ David MacIsaac, “Voice from the Central Blue: The Air Power Theorists” in Paret, Craig, and Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 630; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 19.

⁴¹ Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, 161–62.

⁴² Gen. Leon W. Johnson later claimed that everyone in the Army Air Corps had heard of Douhet and talked about him, but no one paid much attention to theory while Gen. Curtis LeMay declared, “I never saw a copy of Douhet’s book.” Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan, eds., *Strategic Air Warfare: An Interview with Generals Curtis E. LeMay, Leon W. Johnson, David A. Burchinal, and Jack J. Catton* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1988), 28.

American air units in France and, like Douhet, his experiences convinced him of the superiority of air forces.⁴³ After the war, Mitchell preached the importance of air forces in achieving the all-important victory in war. To win, a nation needed to destroy the enemy's armed forces, destroy the enemy's power to make war, and destroy "the morale of the hostile population so that the war will not be renewed at an early date." Total victory could only be accomplished through offensive power and Mitchell maintained that nothing could match the offensive force of air power.⁴⁴ He argued that air power would ultimately allow the United States to defeat Japan in a war which he anticipated between the two in 1924. In his draft, Mitchell wrote, "Eventually in their search for existence the white and yellow races will be brought into armed conflict to determine which shall prevail."⁴⁵ Japan would most likely attack the U.S. at Oahu, he guessed, but the United States would win because Japanese cities were congested and everything was made of inflammable materials like paper and wood – "It makes their country especially vulnerable to aircraft attack," he wrote in 1928.⁴⁶

Mitchell taught airpower doctrine at the Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS) which had been established at Langley Field, Virginia, in 1920, and he and his protégé, Harold George, influenced an entire generation of air commanders.⁴⁷ Many of America's future air generals during World War II learned the morals of air power at ACTS including Henry Arnold, Jimmy Doolittle, Ira Eaker, Haywood Hansell, Curtis LeMay, Laurence Kuter, Carl Spaatz, and Hoyt Vandenberg. These ACTS alumni formed a core group of air power enthusiasts who were often derided as the "Bomber Mafia" because they argued that victory should take precedence over morality.

⁴³ Mitchell even presumed, like Douhet, that air power could prove so decisive that armies might not even be needed to determine the outcome of a war.

⁴⁴ Billy Mitchell, "The Pacific Problem," 1924, JAR.

⁴⁵ Billy Mitchell, "The Pacific Problem," 1924, JAR; Billy Mitchell, "America, Air Power and the Pacific," 1928, JAR.

⁴⁶ Billy Mitchell, "America, Air Power and the Pacific," 1928, JAR.

⁴⁷ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 21.

At ACTS, the Bomber Mafia taught five fundamental principles of offensive strategic airpower. The first premise was that great powers relied on major industrial and economic systems for war-making and for social cohesion. Disrupting those systems, therefore, would undermine the enemy's capacity and will to fight. Second, those major industrial and economic systems depended on critical points whose destruction could bring down the entire system. Assuming, thirdly, that air forces could penetrate air defenses "without unacceptable losses," airpower doctrine held that, fourth, the destruction of selected targets could lead to victory. If enemy resistance continued even after the paralysis or destruction of selected target systems, airpower relied on a fifth principle: that "it may be necessary as a last resort to apply direct force upon the sources of enemy national will by attacking cities." In short, the Bomber Mafia taught that air power could break an enemy's capacity and will to fight by destroying industrial systems, paralyzing economic and civic processes that supported the life of the nation, and by attacking the people themselves. But civilian attacks were supposed to be a last resort. While Douhet had advocated attacks on cities to destroy civilian morale, the Bomber Mafia opposed terror-bombing on moral and practical grounds. "The idea of killing thousands of men, women, and children was basically repugnant to American mores," General Haywood Hansell recalled, although he also noted that people simply were not good targets for high-explosive bombs.⁴⁸

The Army, and the War Department more broadly, scoffed at the idea that airplanes could win wars on their own and argued that only armies could do that because they were the only forces that could conquer and hold territory. The Air Corps insisted, however, that air forces could win

⁴⁸ Haywood S. Hansell Jr, *The Strategic Air War Against Germany and Japan: A Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1986), 7, 10-11, 13.

wars by carrying the battle beyond the battlefield and airpower became the strategic and moral doctrine within the Air Corps during the 1930s.⁴⁹

AREA VS. PRECISION BOMBING

The Bomber Mafia disagreed about targets, though. What should bombers bomb?⁵⁰ All theorists focused on attacking the enemy's capacity to make war, but strategic, area, or carpet bombing targeted enemy populations and their morale or will, in addition to enemy industries and military or government centers. Tactical or precision bombing, in contrast, aimed at “bottleneck targets” to cripple the enemy's economy and their ability to prosecute the war.⁵¹

The debate over airpower ultimately coalesced into an argument about the most effective way and the most ethical way to wage war. Douhet and his disciples had argued that the most effective way to win a war was to threaten, terrorize, and annihilate civilian populations. As the British MP Stanley Baldwin explained in a speech to Parliament on November 10, 1932, “it is well for the man in the street to realise that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed... the bomber will always get through,” he famously declared. “The only defence is in offence, which means that you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves.”⁵²

But because area bombing eliminated the distinction between soldiers and civilians, or between combatants and non-combatants, it was frequently derided as “morale bombing” or “terror bombing” – a form of terrorism. And since area bombing not only accepted but sought civilian casualties – not as collateral damage but as intentional targets – it was always the most controversial

⁴⁹ Hansell, 11, 17-18.

⁵⁰ Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 106.

⁵¹ Werrell, *Blankets of Fire*, 224; David Maclsaac, “Voices from the Central Blue: The Air Power Theorists” in Paret, Craig, and Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 633–34.

⁵² 270 Parl. Deb., H.C. (5th ser.) (1932) 632.

and most criticized aspect of strategic bombing. Mitchell, therefore, favored precision bombing which seemed to offer a moral or humanitarian way of bombing (if such a thing was possible) and promised a way to win decisively without committing immoral acts.

Later, Mitchell began to support bombing enemy populations and considered cities targets for outright destruction, rather than merely disruption, but his protégés, Harold George, Robert Webster, and Donald Wilson helped codify the doctrine of precision bombing which became the accepted strategy at ACTS. George and Webster estimated that the destruction of just seventeen infrastructure targets could make New York City uninhabitable and ACTS emphasized the role of heavy bombers in daylight raids against specific targets.⁵³ ACTS therefore suggested that civilian casualties were not only immoral but unnecessary, and U.S. strategists came to adopt precision bombing on practical, more than moral, grounds.⁵⁴

From its inception, however, precision bombing relied on a number of flawed assumptions. First, theorists presumed that a war could be scientifically managed, and that technology offered a panacea for victory. The doctrine largely ignored enemy countermeasures or defensive systems and it presumed that the physical destruction of an enemy's infrastructure or capacity for war would automatically lead to the destruction of the enemy's will. In this regard, the doctrine exaggerated the fragility of enemy morale but also underestimated the stability and adaptability of modern states. The doctrine also assumed that states were rational actors and that the logic that led to victory was the same logic that encouraged surrender.⁵⁵ Ethical advantages also came with practical challenges – how could bombers hit specific targets with precision? Going into World War II, U.S. strategists also assumed that intelligence on enemy targets would be available, and they overestimated their

⁵³ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 22–23, 27; Hansell, *The Strategic Air War Against Germany and Japan*, 14.

⁵⁴ Werrell, *Blankets of Fire*, 2; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 22.

⁵⁵ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 25.

own capabilities while underestimating the weather. They were also guilty of reductionism in that they focused on means more than ends.⁵⁶

BOMBING GERMANY

In World War II, When American and British crews first began bombing Germany, they bombed to win. As General Hansell explained, “The victory must be so convincing as to permit our statesmen and political leaders to set whatever course was best for the postwar world,” and he supported airpower as “the chief instrument of victory.” Against Germany, therefore, the air offensive aimed to wreck the German war machine by destroying its war industries and the will to resist, topple the German state if possible, and prepare to support the invasion of Fortress Europe.⁵⁷

In the first raids against German targets, U.S. commanders believed Stanley Baldwin’s theory that their bombers would always get through. But they soon realized that they paid a heavy price for bombing German industries and strategic bombing raised moral questions about not only how much the Allies were willing to exact, but how much they were willing to endure. “The issue was, how much of a price were you willing to pay?” General Leon W. Johnson later explained.⁵⁸

In October 1942, when General Curtis LeMay first arrived in Europe, he heard from Lt. Gen. Frank Armstrong, who had led the first B-17 attacks on continental Europe in August, that a plane would be shot down after ten seconds in a straight line of flak. But that did not sound right to LeMay who worked out how many anti-aircraft rounds it would take to hit a B-17 and determined that it did not sound too bad.⁵⁹ Despite the apparent risk and the accepted wisdom which called for bombers to maneuver every few seconds to avoid anti-aircraft fire, LeMay ordered his crews to fly

⁵⁶ David MacIsaac, “Voices from the Central Blue: The Air Power Theorists” in Paret, Craig, and Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 634–35.

⁵⁷ Hansell, *The Strategic Air War Against Germany and Japan*, 50-52.

⁵⁸ Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 23, 43.

⁵⁹ Kohn and Harahan, 33-34.

straight and level over their targets in order to place “bombs on target.”⁶⁰ When LeMay’s crews recoiled from what they saw as suicide missions, the man they called “Iron Ass” insisted on personally flying the lead bomber in order to fairly share the risks of his soldiers.⁶¹ LeMay later explained “the quicker you go through where he could shoot at you, the less rounds could be fired at you, and the less chance by the laws of probability of being hit. If you weaved around, you stayed in the vulnerable area longer. It was actually better to go straight through. We just ignored flak.”⁶² LeMay’s approach proved to be a safer bet, but his “damn the torpedoes” attitude came to embody America’s victory-at-all-costs creed and LeMay’s personal brand of unrelenting fearlessness.

As they came to endure more risks and losses against Germany, American air forces also came to exact more and, although U.S. commanders had always officially favored precision bombing, experiences in Europe weakened their commitment. There, it was America’s friends, as much as their enemies, who got them into trouble and convinced them to kill civilians. While U.S. forces practiced daylight precision bombing against military and industrial targets, their partners in the British Royal Air Force (RAF) bombed Germany indiscriminately by night. Churchill believed in the psychological power of strategic bombing and any British scruples about bombing civilians went up in flames with the Blitz. RAF Bomber Command was led by their own version of LeMay, Air Marshal Arthur “Bomber” Harris, who presided over the terror bombing of Dresden, Hamburg, and other German cities. An oft-told story about Harris relates how the British Air Marshal was stopped in London for speeding one night by a policeman who told the head of Bomber Command, “You might have killed someone sir.” Harris replied with a chill, “Young man, I kill thousands of people

⁶⁰ Kohn and Harahan, 27.

⁶¹ Thomas M. Coffey, *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay*, 1st ed (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), 4.

⁶² Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 35.

every night.”⁶³ Harris urged American forces to join the RAF in night operations against German cities, but U.S. commanders protested, partly because they did not want the U.S. Eighth Air Force to be absorbed by the British Bomber Command but also because the night raids violated their doctrine of precision bombing. Eventually, however, the U.S. adopted area bombing. Airpower doctrine had always considered direct attacks on cities if precision attacks on industrial targets were not conclusive and U.S. air forces merely closed their eyes to the horrors they dropped on German cities and civilians. Long after the war, General Hansell continued to insist that the USAAF “never accepted attack on civilian populations as the main method of air warfare,” but that was only true of American air theories, not practice.⁶⁴

VIEWS ON STRATEGIC BOMBING

Still, when American strategists first began planning a bombing campaign of the Japanese islands, military commanders emphasized precision bombing. At the first Quebec Conference in August 1943, the commander of the Army Air Forces, General Henry “Hap” Arnold had hoped that bombing would force Tokyo’s defeat because Japan would not be able to “take it.”⁶⁵ By destroying “selected systems” of Japan’s transportation and infrastructure, the U.S. Army Air Force Planners hoped to annihilate the nerve center for Japan’s political, military, and economic empire. The bomber offensive would render Japan economically and, therefore, militarily impotent. Studies conducted by the Army Air Forces indicated that twenty-eight bomber groups of twenty-eight bombers each, conducting five missions per month on a fifty percent operation basis for six months could bring Japan to its knees. Based on the bombers available, the Planners estimated that “the

⁶³ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 65.

⁶⁴ Hansell, *The Strategic Air War Against Germany and Japan*, 36, 64.

⁶⁵ *FRUS, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943*, no. 375.

degree of destruction of Japanese resources essential to crush the enemy's capacity for effective armed resistance" would be accomplished by August 31, 1945.⁶⁶

After U.S. air forces began bombing Japan, they faced political pressures, technological circumstances, and moral slippage which all pushed the U.S. towards area bombing and unlimited war. None of the strategists or soldiers in Washington or the Pacific claimed to be moralists, but in their own ways they all wrestled with the moral dilemma of the ends and means of strategic bombing and tried to balance the view that everything is justified in war with the idea that killing is never justified.⁶⁷

Of all the makers of American strategy, Secretary of War Henry Stimson was the most concerned about ethics and morality, but he was either isolated, ineffective, or uninvolved when it came to the bombing campaign.⁶⁸ In contrast, General Arnold remained open-minded about area bombing. Above all, he wanted an independent air force so he pressured combat leaders for decisive results and tried to ensure that the Air Force made the largest contribution possible to winning the war. Otherwise, Arnold did not consider ethics much, he focused on solving the war through air power which he believed could avoid the pointless carnage of World War I and end the war quickly without much blood loss.⁶⁹

As an old-school Army officer, General Douglas MacArthur exhibited nineteenth-century attitudes towards non-combatants and repeatedly restricted the bombing of civilians. When Australian Prime Minister John Curtin asked MacArthur about bombing occupied Australian territory, MacArthur assured him that the U.S. would only hit military targets. In the Philippines,

⁶⁶ *FRUS, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943*, no. 439.

⁶⁷ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 84.

⁶⁸ Crane, 6–7, 71, 73.

⁶⁹ Crane, 69, 71.

MacArthur's headquarters had to approve any target located within inhabited areas or close enough to threaten such areas. After all, MacArthur explained, Filipinos would not understand liberation if it was accompanied by indiscriminate destruction. Later, MacArthur denied General Walter Krueger's request to bomb the Intramuros District during the Battle of Manila, even though it certainly would have accelerated American victory. And when Rabaul complained that a U.S. air raid had destroyed a local hospital in New Guinea, MacArthur ordered a full investigation which determined that the U.S. planes were attacking an anti-aircraft site in the vicinity.⁷⁰

Individual commanders in Asia and the Pacific also emphasized precision bombing for moral reasons. Because the Army Air Force relied on a loose command structure, its field commanders enjoyed more latitude in interpreting or following doctrines.⁷¹ As a result, bombing policies and operations were often shaped by the commanders who actually dropped the bombs rather than the leaders in Washington, and field commanders flying over Kobe or Yokohama often showed more regard for Japanese civilians than their superiors sitting in D.C. General Arnold did not wield as much influence as field commanders like Carl Spaatz, who raised some moral issues about strategic bombing, or Jimmy Doolittle, who maintained a sense of decency and fair play. His raid on Tokyo had hit only military targets after all.⁷² Generally then, as Conrad Crane's examination of daily planning and operations has showed, air commanders largely tried to avoid terror bombing, even when their leaders encouraged it.⁷³

U.S. Commanders struggled to maintain their commitment to precision bombing, however, in the drive for total, quick, and cheap victory. Their "primary objective was to win the war in the

⁷⁰ Crane, 163–66; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 129.

⁷¹ Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 47.

⁷² Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 7, 74–75.

⁷³ Crane, 6–7.

shortest time with the most efficient use of resources and the fewest possible American casualties,” Crane wrote. U.S. forces also needed cooperation from its Allies, and the British strongly supported civilian attacks which further muffled the ethical arguments. Moreover, once factories became acceptable targets, factory workers were too. Commanders also faced pressure from their superiors and public opinion more broadly. Despite these pressures, Crane concluded that American air commanders remained surprisingly loyal to precision bombing doctrines and ideals.⁷⁴ “[M]ost American airmen did the best they could to win the war with consistent application of a doctrine that favored military and industrial targeting over terror bombing,” he wrote. “Their intent was to spare noncombatants while reducing enemy means to resist, and they succeeded better than many historians are willing to concede.”⁷⁵ American airmen appear to have adopted the ideas of their commanders and supported precision bombing as well. They did not like the idea of civilian casualties either, but they carried out the raids because they thought it was the only way to destroy Japanese strategic objectives and end the war quickly.⁷⁶

Despite the conscious efforts to avoid civilian casualties, U.S. officials periodically received complaints about collateral damage. In February 1944, for example, the government of Thailand protested that Anglo-American planes had dropped bombs on Bangkok, destroying temples and schools and injuring civilians. After a lengthy investigation, U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull responded in January 1945 and acknowledged that certain hospitals around Bangkok had been damaged by either British or American aircraft and that American raids in 1943 and 1944 had occasionally damaged non-military targets “in spite of the best efforts to avoid them.” Hull insisted,

⁷⁴ Crane, 9–10.

⁷⁵ Crane, 11.

⁷⁶ Crane, 86, 100.

however, that U.S. forces aimed their attacks against military installations and regretted that their proximity to non-combatants sometimes resulted in civilian casualties.⁷⁷

Americans at large viewed strategic bombing as a necessary measure to win the war but also as payback.⁷⁸ Public perceptions of bombing changed swiftly and severely after Pearl Harbor. A December 1941 poll showed Americans apparently favored urban bombing *even* if it incurred retaliation on U.S. cities. This attitude suggests that Americans were either deeply committed or resigned to total warfare, or perhaps, rather, that they were deeply ignorant about what bombing meant or what it was really like.⁷⁹ At the same time, Americans naturally wanted to believe that their fathers, sons, or brothers were fighting a humane war, even a good war.⁸⁰ Indeed, the country believed that U.S. air forces avoided the indiscriminate killing of civilians when and where possible. In essence, Americans believed that bombing civilians was morally wrong, but they were willing to concede that the war made some terror bombing necessary and assumed that whenever U.S. forces bombed civilians, it was because of military expediency, because there was no other choice, and because it was a necessary evil. But such assumptions inadvertently justified the very killings which Americans opposed. U.S. military leaders recognized that the public favored precision attacks so they emphasized and exaggerated the accuracy and effectiveness of their attacks in their reports to create the impression of “good” bombing which, in turn, shaped public opinion.⁸¹ For example, after the U.S. began bombing German cities in 1943, intentionally or unsympathetically attacking civilians, President Roosevelt had assured Congress in September, “We are not bombing tenements for the sheer sadistic pleasure of killing, as the Nazis did. We are striking devastating blows at

⁷⁷ *FRUS, Diplomatic Papers, 1944, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, the Far East*, Volume V, Docs. 1252-1253.

⁷⁸ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 151.

⁷⁹ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 65.

⁸⁰ Studs Terkel, ed., *“The Good War”*: *An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); John E. Bodnar, *The “Good War” in American Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

⁸¹ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 67; Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 295.

carefully selected, clearly identified strategic objectives – factories, shipyards, munition dumps, transportation facilities, which make it possible for the Nazis to wage war. And we are hitting these military targets and blowing them to bits.”⁸² Americans believed the same was true of their bombing in Japan.

MORAL CRITICISMS OF STRATEGIC BOMBING

Most Americans either believed (or were willfully blind) that the U.S. still practiced precision bombing or accepted these official explanations that civilian casualties were justified or necessary to win the war. But many American Christians were not blind to the realities of total war, and they refused to accept the official line on strategic bombing lying down. They condemned strategic bombing as “obliteration bombing” for killing civilians and Harry Emerson Fosdick, the famous pastor of Riverside Church in Manhattan, led other clergymen in protests. The most eloquent critique of American bombing campaigns came from John Ford, a Jesuit Priest, who wrote “The Morality of Obliteration Bombing” in January 1944, over a year before the attack on Tokyo.⁸³ Outraged by the bombing of German cities, Ford condemned strategic or area bombing on religious and moral grounds for violating the distinction between combatants and non-combatants and because the justification of strategic bombing led to the justification of unlimited war.

Ford accepted precision or tactical bombing and attacks on specific, limited infrastructure or industrial targets, but he decried strategic bombing for destroying urban centers and residential districts.⁸⁴ He did not question the morality or justness of the war itself, only the morality of using particular means to prosecute a just war. Believing that modern war could be “waged within the limits set by the laws of morality,” Ford argued that strategic bombing was excessive and

⁸² Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Message to Congress on the Progress of the War,” September 17, 1943, APP.

⁸³ Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 377–78.

⁸⁴ John C. Ford, “The Morality of Obliteration Bombing,” *Theological Studies* 5 (January 1, 1944): 261, 267.

disproportionate, even against an unscrupulous enemy.⁸⁵ If total war necessarily involved killing civilians, then total war was no longer a just war.⁸⁶

The “principal moral problem” of strategic bombing, according to Ford, involved the rights of the innocent in wartime which were protected by international laws, laws of humanity, and natural laws.⁸⁷ International law converted the natural-law distinctions between “innocent” and “guilty” into formal legal categories – “non-combatant” and “combatant,” or “civilian” and “soldier” – and determined who and what was a legitimate object of attack.⁸⁸ International laws also involved treaties between governments, but a violation by one party did not release the others from the agreement. German and Japanese killings of civilians, therefore, did not release the Allies from their commitment to not bomb civilians. Even in the absence of international law, Ford argued that non-combatants were protected by the laws of humanity and natural laws. The laws of humanity included vague norms based on consensus feelings about decency or fair play rather than formal agreements. Natural laws guaranteed the rights of non-combatants to life and limb, property, and family, and neither the state nor private individuals could overturn, ignore, or grant exceptions to such laws.⁸⁹ Total war violated all these laws by killing non-combatants.

Proponents of total war had argued, of course, that all inhabitants or citizens of an enemy country were legitimate objects of attack. Total war had certainly blurred or erased the line between combatants and non-combatants as governments mobilized their entire populations, and national economies integrated all its members and components for the war effort.⁹⁰ In a fireside chat in July 1943 President Roosevelt had explained that the longer the war went on the harder it would be to

⁸⁵ Ford, 267.

⁸⁶ Ford, 268.

⁸⁷ Ford, 269.

⁸⁸ Ford, 272–73.

⁸⁹ Ford, 270–71.

⁹⁰ Ford, 274–75, 277.

distinguish the “fighting front” from the “home front.”⁹¹ In his 1944 State of the Union Address he dissolved the distinction altogether, “There is only one front,” he announced.⁹² Nevertheless, Ford refused to believe that all enemy inhabitants were legitimate objects of attack. Soldiers under arms were undoubtedly combatants but the status of munitions workers or labor battalions remained unclear.⁹³ Other Catholic leaders had maintained that even in total war, old men, women, children and those engaged in peaceful occupations like doctors, teachers, and clergy should be considered innocent non-combatants. Even in industrial centers that directly augmented the war effort, most women, almost all children under the age of fourteen, and almost all men over seventy were innocent. The idea, therefore, that the entire nation was arrayed in arms was fallacious.⁹⁴ And even if they were involved in war-making, their involvement was not as immediate as active combatants in the field, ships, or air.⁹⁵ Furthermore, governments at war still recognized the distinction between combatants and non-combatants since they protested when their own women and children were attacked and downplayed the damage or ruthlessness of their own attacks. Just because strategists did not know exactly where to draw the line between combatants and non-combatants did not mean that there was no line at all and that everyone should be treated as a combatant.⁹⁶

Indeed, Ford claimed that “the most radical and significant change of all in modern warfare is not the increased co-operation of civilians behind the lines with the armed forces, but the

⁹¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Fireside Chat,” July 28, 1943, APP. An early draft of the speech erased the difference between combatants and non-combatants entirely: “War has to be conducted by an entire population. You cannot draw a line of demarcation between the soldier at the front and the soldier training back home. You cannot draw a line between the man or woman in uniform or the man or woman in civilian clothes. You cannot draw a line between the worker in a munition factory and the worker in a plow factory. You cannot draw a line between a worker turning out airplanes and a worker turning out copper or coal, or a worker turning out wheat or cotton or hogs.” Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Radio Address to the Home Front,” July 28, 1943, Speech File 1475, Franklin D. Roosevelt, MSF, FDRPL.

⁹² Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of Union Message to Congress,” January 11, 1944, APP.

⁹³ Ford, “The Morality of Obliteration Bombing,” 280.

⁹⁴ Ford, 286, 288.

⁹⁵ Ford, 277–79.

⁹⁶ Ford, 280–81.

enormously increased power of the armed forces to reach behind the lines and attack civilians indiscriminately, whether they are thus co-operating or not.”⁹⁷ If U.S. strategists could not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, they should err on the side of caution and presume the innocence of enemy populations, rather than their guilt. They should presume an enemy’s right to life, not their own right to kill. Military commanders should have to justify their attacks on civilian populations; civilians should not have to save themselves by proving their exemption and innocence.⁹⁸

In short, Ford argued that the U.S. should start with the moral command, “Thou shalt not kill.” U.S. strategists might claim that military necessity required bombing civilians, that the enemy did it first, that bombing was an acceptable reprisal, that the present situation was abnormal, or that the whole enemy nation was involved in aggression. But all the typical justifications for strategic bombing were worthless, Ford declared.⁹⁹

To deny the distinction between combatants and non-combatants was to submit to the morality of total war. Civilians had always played some role in supporting their armies but if there was no difference between civilians and soldiers then no one was innocent and no one was safe. Ford even went so far as to list over one hundred occupations that were threatened by strategic bombing including piano tuners, surgeons, theater owners, hospital patients, and all children with the use of reason since they were all complicit in their nation’s aggression.¹⁰⁰ And why stop there? Couldn’t infants be targeted too as military potential, he asked disgustedly.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Ford, 281.

⁹⁸ Ford, 281–82.

⁹⁹ Ford, 282.

¹⁰⁰ Ford, 283–84.

¹⁰¹ Ford, 277.

Ford observed though that “the immorality of obliteration bombing... would be crystal clear... were it not for the appeal to the principle of the double effect.” By “double effect,” Ford meant that the evil results of American actions could not be imputed morally as long as the action was immediately directed to another result, if the effect was not intended, or if the effect was justified by proportionate cause. In the case of strategic bombing, double effect suggested that the good outcomes of bombing justified its bad outcomes. Thus, the bombing of war industries and military installations, leading to the beneficial defeat of the enemy, was justified, even though it simultaneously injured and killed innocent civilians and destroyed their property. The damage to civilian life and property could also be justified by double effect if the destruction was not intentional but simply incidental. That is, if bombing civilians was not a means to a good effect but only collateral, then it could be justified. Finally, double effect meant death and destruction to civilians could be justified if there were sufficient justifying causes like shortening the war or saving soldiers’ lives.¹⁰² In these ways, the United States could do evil in order to do good.

But double effect was not a comprehensive moral guide for warfare. Ford questioned when military actions could really be considered two-fold in their immediate effect, and whether evil effects were only incidental to the good effects. Was it possible to bomb an enemy city without directly intending to damage innocent civilians and their property? Could you drop a bomb on a person’s house and only intend to destroy the house?¹⁰³ No. Even air commanders who favored or demanded precision bombing attacks soon found that their forces did not have the technical ability to hit such precise targets and civilian damage was unavoidable. In fact, Msgr. John K. Ryan had argued that when an entire city was destroyed, it was the *military* targets that were destroyed indirectly and incidentally, rather than the civilian targets. In such cases, good was incidental to evil

¹⁰² Ford, 289.

¹⁰³ Ford, 290–91.

and the double effect was inverted. The evil effect was first, immediate, and direct while the military advantage was secondary, derivative, and dependent. Moreover, in U.S. strategic bombing campaigns, the deaths of civilians were not only permitted but intended.¹⁰⁴ After all, Ford observed, it was impossible to terrorize civilians or undermine civilian morale without having a direct intent to kill and injure them. The main cause of terror and demoralization was the threat to life and limb.¹⁰⁵ American political leaders would likely never proclaim the explicit goal of killing civilians, but Ford suggested that it was impossible to completely separate bombing results from their intentions.¹⁰⁶

Ford also questioned the claims that strategic bombing was justified because it shortened the war and saved lives. “It is illegitimate,” he declared, “to appeal to the principle of the double effect when the alleged proportionate cause is speculative, future, and problematical, while the evil effect is definite, widespread, certain, and immediate.”¹⁰⁷ Perhaps strategic bombing could shorten the war and save lives, but he argued that “an evil which is certain and extensive and immediate will rarely be compensated for by a problematical, speculative, future good.”¹⁰⁸ Strategic bombing might be necessary to win the war by destroying the enemy’s will and means to resist, but military necessity hid excesses and Ford questioned whether terror bombing worked. And even if strategic bombing did shorten the war, saved many lives, and achieved some future positive outcomes, Ford insisted that it could not be legitimate because of the categorical imperative. Once strategic bombing became a legitimate or lawful part of warfare, anyone could use it, and Ford argued that present goods in the war against Germany and Japan could not justify the future evils that would result if strategic

¹⁰⁴ Ford, 291–92.

¹⁰⁵ Ford, 293–94.

¹⁰⁶ Ford, 297; This is significant since Hannah Arendt, Isabel Hull, and Claudia Koonz have suggested that evil intentions cannot be responsible for all the evil effects we see; Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; Hull, *Absolute Destruction*; Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Ford, “The Morality of Obliteration Bombing,” 302.

¹⁰⁸ Ford, 298–99.

bombing became universal in warfare. He concluded: “I do not believe any shortening of the present war, or any saving of the lives of our soldiers... is a cause sufficient to justify on moral grounds the use of obliteration bombing in the future.”¹⁰⁹

Ultimately, Ford condemned strategic or obliteration bombing because it discarded the distinctions between combatants and non-combatants and because the justification of strategic bombing would lead to the justification of total or unlimited war. He wrote: “Each new and more terrifying procedure, with more and more loss of innocent life, can always be defended as a mere extension of the principle [of total war], justified by the desperate military necessities of the case.”¹¹⁰ In short, strategic bombing was a slippery slope. Once it was justified in any circumstance on grounds of military necessity, it could be used again, and its use could lead to even worse atrocities. City bombing moved the war’s crosshairs from the battlefield to the city and from war factories to residential districts. Bombing civilians was just one step away from biological or chemical (or nuclear) warfare and Ford worried that strategic bombing would dissolve the limits on war over time.¹¹¹ In summary, Ford explained:

Obliteration bombing... is an immoral attack on the rights of the innocent. It includes a direct intent to do them injury. Even if this were not true, it would still be immoral, because no proportionate cause could justify the evil done; and to make it legitimate would soon lead the world to the immoral barbarity of total war. The voice of the Pope and the fundamental laws of the charity of Christ confirm this condemnation.¹¹²

In February 1944, one month after Ford published his condemnation, Alfred Hassler, an anti-war activist who worked for the United States Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR USA), published his own scathing denunciation of strategic bombing. His article in *Fellowship*, “Slaughter of the Innocents,” implicitly compared the bombing of civilians to the Biblical slaughter when King

¹⁰⁹ Ford, 301–2.

¹¹⁰ Ford, 303.

¹¹¹ Ford, 304.

¹¹² Ford, 308–9.

Herod attempted to murder the Christ-Child and condemned strategic bombing for destroying lives and morals.

Hassler quoted the Scottish missionary, J. H. Oldham, who had proclaimed in October 1940 that “The deliberate killing of non-combatants is murder. If war degenerates into wilful [sic] slaughter of the innocent, Christians must either become pacifists or give up their religion.”¹¹³ Hassler thus insisted that strategic bombing was evil because it wiped out entire cities and killed innocent invalids, infants, and pregnant women along with enemy soldiers, and it turned innocent boys into “killers more deadly than Genghis Khan.”¹¹⁴ What would it cost the United States? he exclaimed, “What price shall we have to pay for this bitterness we have meted out to our fellow men? For assuredly, if this is a moral universe, we shall have to pay for what we are doing!”¹¹⁵

Like Ford, Hassler argued that war was a slippery slope. A nation that participated in total war, he wrote, “begins a process of progressive moral deterioration that leads eventually to the sanction of the most dreadful acts of torture and destruction. Whatever the high moral purposes for which a nation professes to fight, they must inevitably be degraded and mocked by the inexorable destruction of all moral values that takes place under the guise of ‘military necessity.’”¹¹⁶ For this reason, Hassler rejected the instrumental logic of total victory. As long as the war continued with unconditional surrender as its goal, “we are in the hands of those whose profession is death,” he declared.¹¹⁷

Despite these criticisms, widespread protests against strategic bombing never took place in the United States. The scale of the war, the evils of German Nazism and Japanese militarism, and

¹¹³ R. Alfred Hassler, “Slaughter of the Innocents,” *Fellowship* 10, no. 2 (February 1944): 19.

¹¹⁴ Hassler, 19-21.

¹¹⁵ Hassler, 20.

¹¹⁶ Hassler, 19.

¹¹⁷ Hassler, 21.

the government's insistence on military necessity convinced Americans that bombing was the "right" thing to do. Bombing civilians seemed justified when the cause was righteous, when the enemy was evil, and when killing became the alternative to dying.¹¹⁸

Strategic bombing was also as much a symptom of total war as its cause. Although Ford denied that the Axis and the Allies were fighting a total war and that whole populations were at war with one another, strategic bombing had already won legitimacy through military necessity. Germany and Japan had already bombed civilians in Rotterdam, Coventry, Chongqing, and a hundred other cities, and the United States itself was sliding down the slippery slope. While Ford was right that war without limits was immoral and that strategic bombing would further un-limit the war, once states and leaders accepted that some things were worth killing and dying for – whether by bayonet or bomb – it was difficult to halt the totalizing tendencies of war.¹¹⁹ Unless it was condemned entirely, war itself was a slippery slope that threatened to overwhelm all restraints and become unlimited.

THE B-29 AND GENERAL LEMAY

To defeat Japan, the United States developed a super-weapon that could wipe out entire cities and bring Tokyo to its knees – a new long-range heavy bomber: the B-29 Superfortress. Americans have come to see the atomic bombs as the ultimate silver bullet and the culmination of air power strategy and morality during World War II; but before the atomic bombs, there was the B-29. A new generation of bomber, the B-29's \$3.75 billion price tag cost almost twice as much as the Manhattan Project (a paltry \$2 billion). For that price, "the Army Air Force's three-billion-dollar gamble" gave the U.S. the most technologically advanced aircraft whose superior speed, range, altitude, defense, and carrying capacity made it the biggest, fastest, most powerful bomber in the

¹¹⁸ Tirman, *The Deaths of Others*, 56.

¹¹⁹ Ford, "The Morality of Obliteration Bombing," 303–4.

world.¹²⁰ With an effective range of 1,500 miles and a capacity for ten tons of bombs, the B-29 was the Army Air Force's "most potent 'softening up' weapon." Indeed, the Superfortress was made for bombing Japan. As General Arnold explained, its strategic purpose was "to destroy the enemy's ability to fight" by destroying Japanese war production and General LeMay wanted the B-29s "to undermine the morale of the Japanese people to a point where their capacity and will to wage war was decisively weakened."¹²¹

Its capabilities and performance made the B-29 the best bomber of the war and, when combined with nuclear bombs, the B-29 "represented a truly revolutionary weapons' system."¹²² Meanwhile, Japanese propaganda continued to rely on the safety of the home islands to reinforce the belief that Japan was winning the war. In April 1944, on the second anniversary of the Doolittle Raid, Tokyo claimed that Roosevelt and Stimson knew that trying to bomb Tokyo was futile.¹²³ Less than sixty days later, however, on June 15-16, forty-seven Superfortresses raided the Yawata steel works and attacked the Japanese home islands for the first time.

Despite the B-29's capabilities, the Pacific Ocean was still too vast for effective bombing raids in 1944. The Army Air Force searched frantically for nearby air bases in Siberia and Alaska, and eventually deployed the B-29s to China. But "it proved impractical to operate the most sophisticated bomber of the war out of one of the most underdeveloped areas of the world at the end of the longest supply line in history."¹²⁴ Bomber crews also had few planes for training and the

¹²⁰ United States, Army Air Forces, Personal Narratives Division, *Combat Air Forces of World War II, Army of the United States* (Washington D. C.: Army Times, 1945), 86; *FRUS, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943*, no. 439; *FRUS, Conference at Quebec, 1944*, no. 183.

¹²¹ United States, Army Air Forces, *Second Report of the Commanding General of the Army Air Forces to the Secretary of War, February 27, 1945* (Washington, D.C., 1945), 64, 72; Curtis E. LeMay, "B-29 Campaign in the Pacific," undated, JAR.

¹²² Werrell, *Blankets of Fire*, 225, 238.

¹²³ Propaganda Highlights (April 18, 1944), MR 000.71-Sec.2 - Propaganda (November 1943-October 1944), Box 46, Series 2: Military Files, Roosevelt Library, Map Room Papers (1941-1945), FDRPL.

¹²⁴ Werrell, *Blankets of Fire*, 225.

Superfortresses themselves were rushed into combat where they experienced severe technical problems. Equipped with a Wright R-3350 engine that was prone to failure, many of the B-29s suffered accidents or were forced to abort their missions.¹²⁵ When the B-29s did reach Japan, bomber crews encountered few enemy planes, little anti-aircraft fire, and undefended waters. But they also ran into jet streams of 180-200 knots, and experienced bad weather and fatigue brought on by the long twelve to fourteen-hour flights to and from the home islands.¹²⁶ Directing the bombing campaign was also difficult when General Arnold worked directly under the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, while the operations were handled by field commanders at Pacific headquarters in Guam, nearly 8,000 miles (12,800 km) away.¹²⁷

To manage these problems, Arnold moved all B-29s to the Mariana Islands in December 1944 and consolidated bomber commands under Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, the youngest two-star general in the Army Air Force, who had been transferred from Europe earlier in the year to help American crews deliver their bombs on target.¹²⁸ In the public memory, Curtis LeMay was “the man who wanted to bomb everything and everybody,” his biographer explained, “the chief exponent of the idea that aerial bombardment was the solution to all problems.” After the old soldier Douglas MacArthur and his corncob pipe faded away, LeMay and his cigar became the ultimate parody of the American Cold War general, famously caricatured as General Jack D. Ripper and General Buck

¹²⁵ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 89, 170; Craig M. Cameron, “Fanaticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941-1945,” in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 54–57; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 369. See also United States, Army Air Forces, Personal Narratives Division, *Combat Air Forces of World War II, Army of the United States*, 89-90.

¹²⁶ Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 54.

¹²⁷ *FRUS, Conference at Quebec, 1944*, Doc. 183.

¹²⁸ United States, Army Air Forces, Personal Narratives Division, *Combat Air Forces of World War II, Army of the United States*, 90; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 171; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 369.

Turgidson in Stanley Kubrick's brilliantly dark 1964 film, *Dr. Strangelove*. But for the United States Air Force and most military experts, LeMay remains "the greatest air commander" in U.S. history.¹²⁹

During World War II, LeMay skyrocketed up the Army Air Force chain of command – from a major to a major general in less than three years – because he increased results everywhere he went.¹³⁰ Along the way he also earned the reputation of blowing up everything he touched, which was just what the Army Air Force wanted. Personally, LeMay was blunt, uncompromising, and cold-blooded. His friends called him "The Diplomat" with no little irony. After receiving his commission from the Ohio State Reserve Officer Training Corps, LeMay attended the ACTS but he showed little interest in theory or strategy. Instead, he approached airplanes and combat like a troubleshooter. In the Pacific, LeMay enjoyed an unusual level of independence, even for air commanders. He did not have to report to MacArthur and the army, or Nimitz and the navy. Only General Arnold commanded LeMay's accountability and he suffered his fourth heart attack in January 1945.¹³¹ LeMay's autonomy thus allowed him to remake U.S. bombing operations in his own image and he transformed not only the bombing campaign but the progress of the entire Pacific War. Once established in Guam, he brought in some folks from his previous command in China and exerted pressure to complete facilities and bases for the bombers and their crews. He established new maintenance programs and a radar school to improve training, tried breaking Russian codes to obtain weather reports, and even sent medical supplies to Mao Zedong in exchange for the right to build a radio station in Yenan to report on weather patterns and downed

¹²⁹ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 4.

¹³⁰ United States, Army Air Forces, Personal Narratives Division, *Combat Air Forces of World War II, Army of the United States*, 89.

¹³¹ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 3–4; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 166–67.

airmen.¹³² As in Europe, LeMay's objective was to place "MORE BOMBS ON THE TARGET" with minimum American losses.¹³³

None of his efforts seemed to work though. After arriving in the Marianas, LeMay complained that "B-29s had as many bugs as the entomological department of the Smithsonian Institution" and the obstacles posed by long flights and Japanese jet streams suggested that even the bombing campaign would be long and hard and would not end the war anytime soon.¹³⁴ "I hope you don't get the idea that Japan is being blown sky-high and that she'll be bombed out of the war within another week or two," the war correspondent Ernie Pyle told American readers in February 1945. He explained that "Even with heavy and constant bombing it would take years to reduce Japan by bombing alone." Even some of the bomber pilots asked Pyle, "Do the people at home think the B-29's are going to win the war?"¹³⁵

THE ROUTE TO TOKYO: PRECISION TO AREA BOMBING

The conditions of the Pacific – the weather and operational problems – undoubtedly induced the U.S. to abandon precision tactics and bomb Japanese civilians, but it would be wrong to say that the war gave the U.S. no choice. U.S. strategists ultimately sided with military necessity over military doctrine because victory was more important to them – a greater "good" – than avoiding enemy casualties. Winning was the order of the day and the benefits of destroying Japanese cities outweighed the costs.

¹³² Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 172–73; Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 57, 60.

¹³³ Combat Crew Manual, XX Bomber Command, APO 493 (December 1944), JAR.

¹³⁴ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 170.

¹³⁵ Ernie Pyle and David Nichols, *Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches*, 1st ed (New York: Random House, 1986), 375.

Perhaps this should have been expected. The visions, ideals, doctrines, and rhetoric of limited or just warfare always cut against the grain of war's realities.¹³⁶ As Conrad Crane explained, "Exorbitant expectations for accuracy, bloodlessness, and speedy victory always clash with the grim realities of war. History reveals that any lengthy American strategic-bombing campaign targeting national capacity, successful or not, eventually diverges from those precision ideals, or at least stretches their boundaries."¹³⁷ But LeMay primarily initiated and oversaw the strategic and moral shift from precision bombing and conventional attacks to area bombing and incendiary attacks in the spring of 1945 because of operational frustrations and practical reasoning. He told General Arnold in April 1945 that weather continued to be their "worst operational enemy" and the primary reason he lowered the altitude for incendiary attacks.¹³⁸

As in Europe, U.S. commanders were also enticed by their allies to compromise their moral principles. Their British counterparts explicitly supported firebombing and Churchill had encouraged Congress to turn Japan's cities into ashes for the sake of world peace. The Prime Minister told a joint session in May 1943, "It is the duty of those charged with the direction of the war to... begin the process, so necessary and desirable, of laying the cities and other munition centers of Japan in ashes. For in ashes they must surely lie before peace comes back to the world."¹³⁹ But even without British peer pressure, the European bombing campaigns accustomed U.S. strategists to attacks on civilians whose deaths "were a matter of decreasing concern," and by the time American bombers reached Japan, "civilian casualties were of no concern at all."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*.

¹³⁷ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 13.

¹³⁸ Curtis E. LeMay to Henry H. Arnold, April 5, 1945, JAR.

¹³⁹ *Address of the Right Honorable Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain delivered before a joint meeting of the two Houses of Congress on Wednesday, May 19, 1943*, 4; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 1–3; Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 103, 109–10; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 150.

¹⁴⁰ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 115.

However, while Allied advocacy and domestic lobbying sidelined bombing ethics, U.S. strategists ultimately accepted the immorality of strategic bombing because winning the war surpassed any other moral consideration and when precision bombing did not work, American air forces turned to area bombing. B-29 crews targeted Japanese military facilities and factories but when normal precision tactics brought disappointing results, U.S. strategists became more permissive of area bombing and switched to firebombing with incendiaries.¹⁴¹

Incendiary bombs, like almost everything else, had first been used in World War I. German zeppelins and airplanes dropped thermite devices against targets in England and the Allies soon developed their own incendiary weapons. The United States developed two incendiary darts, one for use against fields and forests and another to attack buildings, but neither one saw combat. After the Great War, the United States largely neglected incendiaries in favor of high-explosive bombs which could apparently do everything that an incendiary could but, during the 1930s, the Army Air Corps began to show more interest in incendiaries.¹⁴² At that time, Americans feared gas attacks more than any bombing but Col. Joaquin E. Zanetti, a chemistry professor at Columbia and a reserve officer in the Chemical Warfare Service, defended the effectiveness of incendiaries in 1936 and warned that metropolitan areas faced much greater threats from incendiary bombs than from gas. The devices might look small, he acknowledged, but the fundamental differences between fire and gas made fire much more dangerous to a large city. “Gas dissipates while fire propagates,” he explained, and “each of these small bombs embodies within itself the devastating possibilities of Mrs. O’Leary’s cow.”¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Crane, 8; Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 364.

¹⁴² Brooks E. Kleber and Dale Birdsell, *The Chemical Warfare Service: Chemicals in Combat*, 614-616.

¹⁴³ “Fire Bombs Held Worst Peril of Next War; Columbia Professor Sees Cities Laid Waste,” *NYT*, January 12, 1936; Catherine O’Leary’s cow was accused of igniting the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 after it supposedly kicked over a lantern in the O’Leary’s barn.

In September 1941, the Chemical Warfare Service (CWS) became responsible for the incendiary bomb program and Dr. Louis F. Feiser, a Harvard chemist, developed military napalm in 1942. By the time the Army Air Forces were ready to strike German cities they had become committed to firebombing but although the results in Europe were effective, they were not spectacular.¹⁴⁴ Given the practical challenges that the bombing campaign faced in the Pacific, however, incendiaries looked like another silver bullet for the war effort. Instead of knocking the buildings down with high explosives, B-29s would drop thousands of small bombs filled with napalm. An M69 bomb could throw the flammable jelly one hundred feet which would splatter on walls, flow into crevices, and burn the insides of buildings.¹⁴⁵ Drafts fueled by thousands of small fires would swiftly merge into an enormous inferno that could level an entire city.¹⁴⁶ Incendiary devices seemed morally infernal, but for many U.S. strategists they were more sensible because they worked best for large raids and large areas. General Arnold had observed in Europe that incendiaries could burn down precise industrial targets that could not be effectively damaged by high-explosive bombs, they could start fires which would provide beacons for bombers at night, and they could burn down cities when necessary.¹⁴⁷ Incendiaries, therefore, were useful for both precision and area bombing.

Most importantly, Japan was especially vulnerable to firebombing and everyone knew it. Eighty percent of the construction in Japan involved wood and paper and its “home-shop” production facilities which were distributed throughout urban Japan made firebombing more feasible and effective, and therefore more tempting.¹⁴⁸ For American strategists, therefore, Japanese

¹⁴⁴ Kleber and Birdsell, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, 617-624.

¹⁴⁵ Kleber and Birdsell, 627.

¹⁴⁶ Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 370.

¹⁴⁷ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 130.

¹⁴⁸ Kleber and Birdsell, *The Chemical Warfare Service*, 625; Hansell, *The Strategic Air War Against Germany and Japan*, 177.

factories and houses were made for firebombing.¹⁴⁹ In a report to the Committee of Operations Analysts in September 1944, U.S. strategists outlined the economic effects of area bombing on six Japanese cities: Tokyo, Kawasaki, Yokohama, Osaka, Kobe, and Nagoya. Combined, the target cities held nearly 15 million inhabitants – twenty percent of Japan’s total population – and one-third of all the manufacturing workers in the country. The report stated that “No other industrial nation is dependent on so small an area for so substantial a portion of its manufactured products as is Japan,” and the report estimated that bombing attacks would destroy fifteen percent of Japan’s total annual manufacturing output (and twenty percent of the war industries’ output). The report further determined that incendiary bombings could destroy all six cities within a few weeks and recommended that U.S. forces concentrate their firebombing to maximize destruction. In addition to the economic losses, the bombing attacks would likely destroy seventy percent of the housing of the six cities, forcing the evacuation of 3.5 million people. In total, the report estimated that bombing would “dehouse” 7.75 million people and kill nearly 500,000. Indeed, the report concluded that the bombing of Japan would cause “a degree of destruction never before equalled.”¹⁵⁰

American strategists also accepted firebombing out of military necessity. They wanted to win the war decisively, quickly, and at minimal cost and, if anything, they became even more committed to those desires and objectives by 1945. While B-29s continued to blast their targets in Japan, they were missing their main mark: forcing Tokyo’s surrender. Although General Haywood Hansell defended the efficiency and morality of precision bombing, Arnold felt skeptical about the chances of precision success and supported firebombing to maximize the Army Air Force’s credibility.

¹⁴⁹ Craig M. Cameron, “Fanaticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941-1945” in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 54; Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 126; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 168; Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 364.

¹⁵⁰ Report to Committee of Operations Analysts: Economic Effects of Successful Area Attacks on Six Japanese Cities September 4, 1944, JAR.

LeMay liked incendiaries because they promised results. Hansell was appalled but Arnold ordered a trial firebombing run on Nagoya on January 3, 1945.¹⁵¹ The U.S. thus turned to firebombing because it threatened to destroy Japan more completely, which, U.S. officials hoped, would force Japan's unconditional surrender. In short, strategists believed that area bombing and firebombing had become militarily necessary and in the last year of the war bombing operations were motivated above all else by the desire to end the war on American terms.¹⁵²

Island-hopping had convinced Robert Sherrod and Hanson Baldwin that the United States could not win the war on its terms without boots on the ground, but the bloody amphibious assaults convinced Arnold and other air commanders to change their strategy from bombing to *enable* the invasion of Japan to bombing to *preclude* invasion. At the first Quebec Conference in August 1943, Arnold had proposed air attacks to “soften” Japan in order to make the invasion and occupation of the home islands easier for American troops.¹⁵³ But by 1945, U.S. strategists expressed hope that bombing would accelerate Japan's surrender and decisively win the war on its own, obviating the need for a bloody invasion altogether and saving American lives.¹⁵⁴ “Our whole goal was to try to end the war before the invasion,” LeMay later explained.¹⁵⁵ In February 1945, President Roosevelt hoped it would not be necessary to invade the Japanese islands and announced that the U.S. would invade only if it was “absolutely necessary.” The Japanese army still had four million soldiers to call upon and the President hoped that intensive bombing would “destroy Japan and its army and thus save American lives.”¹⁵⁶ In his report to Stimson about the Army Air Forces that same month, Arnold declared, “we must bombard the Japanese mainland on an unprecedented scale. We must

¹⁵¹ Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 369; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 167.

¹⁵² Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 8.

¹⁵³ *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939-30 June 1945* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1996), 162.

¹⁵⁴ Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 370.

¹⁵⁵ Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 59.

¹⁵⁶ *FRUS, Diplomatic Papers, Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945*, Doc. 393.

bring the maximum amount of air power to bear against Japan with the least loss of time, so that Japan will be defeated with the minimum loss of American lives.”¹⁵⁷ In a letter in March, Arnold told LeMay that only the Army Air Forces could “make the Japanese homeland constantly aware of the price she will pay in this futile struggle.” With 1,000 bombers under his command, Arnold thought LeMay should be able “to destroy whole industrial cities should that be required.”¹⁵⁸

The United States also adopted area bombing and firebombing because technology made killing civilians not only physically, but morally easier. Aircraft, like the gun and the bow before it, distanced the perpetrators from their victims and separated the killing from the dying. As the killing became more distant, physically and psychologically, the enemy grew more remote and monolithic which allowed for even more detached killing. As Richard Overy has pointed out, an American army would never have run amok in Tokyo murdering 100,000 people, but bombing permitted a physical, psychological, and moral distance that allowed bomber crews to kill innocent men, women, and children without perturbing their consciences.¹⁵⁹ John Dower has further observed, “The new capability for rapidly killing large numbers of people was accompanied, almost inevitably, by a general acceptance of the belief that in the ‘total war’ of the modern age it was necessary and even proper to do so, with little distinction made any longer between combatants and noncombatants.”¹⁶⁰ The capability to kill thus increased the willingness to kill.

Area bombing and firebombing also fit U.S. strategists’ conceptions of American identity by virtue of its industrial power, association of technology with progress, and its demonstration of Yankee ingenuity. Even without explicit ideological fanaticism, the United States became the

¹⁵⁷ United States, Army Air Forces, *Second Report of the Commanding General of the Army Air Forces to the Secretary of War, February 27, 1945*, 95.

¹⁵⁸ H. H. Arnold to Curtis E. LeMay, March 21, 1945, JAR.

¹⁵⁹ Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 296.

¹⁶⁰ Dower, *War without Mercy*, 294.

producer and exporter of industrial killing policies.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, Michael Sherry has argued that “among policymakers, if not in the public at large, a technological fanaticism often governed actions, an approach to making war in which satisfaction of organizational and professional drives loomed larger than the overt passions of war.”¹⁶² He later defined technological fanaticism as “a pursuit of destructive ends expressed, sanctioned, and disguised by the organization and application of technological means.” In other words, U.S. strategists did not pursue the destruction of Japan solely to achieve their political ends, but simply because technology enabled them to do so.¹⁶³ Indeed, from a strategic perspective, strategic fire, and atomic bombing represented the climax of American fanaticism even more than island-hopping. As Craig Cameron explained, “Militarily and symbolically, this aspect of the Pacific War embodies precisely the sort of American fanaticism that has awed and frightened the world throughout the Cold War and after: the capability and willingness to wield with limited discrimination and impersonal cold-bloodedness weapons of massive destructive power.” According to Cameron, American bombing campaigns exhibited fanaticism in the industrial scale of destruction, the emphasis on scientific and technological solutions to complex problems, and the “high degree of impersonal bureaucratic abstraction in the planning, conduct, and recollection of the bombings.”¹⁶⁴

In 1945, America’s obsession with technology and the determination to win the war while saving time and lives led U.S. strategists to employ technological solutions rather than costly strategies (for Americans). Certainly, in the war’s final months, technological fanaticism pervaded American strategies on the ground and in the air as “technology bridged the gap between the

¹⁶¹ Craig M. Cameron, “Fanaticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941-1945” in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 53, 57.

¹⁶² Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power*, xi.

¹⁶³ Sherry, 251–52.

¹⁶⁴ Craig M. Cameron, “Fanticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941-1945” in Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 52–53.

marines' exterminationist warrior ethos and the means to realize it."¹⁶⁵ America's fanaticism with technology promoted precision more than area bombing because American commanders believed that technological innovations could make bombing more accurate and would therefore save both lives and effort since less accuracy posed greater dangers for civilians.¹⁶⁶ But after precision bombing proved less effective, LeMay's troubleshooting, area bombing, and incendiaries all came together with the firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945.

TOKYO, THE BEGINNING

Between its first large-scale attack against the Japanese homeland on November 24, 1944, and the firebombing of Tokyo on March 9-10, 1945, the 21st Bomber Command had conducted twenty missions representing 2,037 sorties. The attacks had used both incendiaries and high-explosive bombs and the operations were patterned on conventional Army Air Force doctrine: "daylight high altitude precision bombing in formation." However, the results had been "unsatisfactory," according to LeMay. The Bomber Command had been assigned nine (later eleven) high priority targets and in 2,000 sorties not one of them was destroyed. Several had been damaged enough to halt or interfere with production for a time, but in four months of B-29 warfare, the Bomber Command had virtually nothing to show for its efforts and LeMay concluded that revolutionary changes were needed.¹⁶⁷ On March 3, he told General Lauris Norstad, Arnold's chief of staff, that he was preparing some "very radical methods" since a few bombs on target were better than no bombs at all.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Craig M. Cameron, "Fanticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941-1945" in Hughes and Johnson, 17.

¹⁶⁶ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 101, 115.

¹⁶⁷ *Phase Analysis: Incendiary Operations*, JAR.

¹⁶⁸ Curtis E. LeMay to Lauris Norstad, March 3, 1945, JAR.

LeMay knew that U.S. bombers would not win the war with the way things were going and so, on his own initiative, he switched tactics for the upcoming raid on Tokyo and decided to launch his B-29s unaccompanied and unarmed in incendiary night attacks at low altitudes.¹⁶⁹ B-29s had not bombed by day or night, in any operation, from altitudes less than 24,000 feet, but since high-altitude attacks had failed, LeMay planned to attack from lower altitudes where the winds only averaged 10-40 knots instead of the 120-180 knots that American crews had encountered in the Japanese jet streams at 25,000-30,000 feet.¹⁷⁰ Such a simple adjustment reduced the strain on B-29 engines which meant the bombers could fly almost the entire mission at cruising power which prolonged the operational life of the engine. Lower wind velocities also meant that navigational errors were less serious and easier to correct so there were fewer aborts, less maintenance, and less fuel which freed space for more bombs. LeMay hoped the night would protect American bombers, but the lower altitudes also increased the threat of anti-aircraft fire. Just as he had in Europe though, LeMay told his crews to ignore flak (even though LeMay expected substantial losses) and had his bombers drop their payloads from just 7,000 feet which enabled American crews to bomb visually and increase destruction.¹⁷¹ He further denuded the Superfortresses of all their defensive armaments and ammunition except for the tail guns which left more space for incendiaries. Only one or two gunners would accompany the mission instead of the usual four and each Superfortress would carry approximately 13,600 pounds of bombs.¹⁷² Night attacks also required area bombing, however, since precision bombing would be impossible, but LeMay argued that area bombing was necessary anyway because Japanese industries were concentrated in thousands of small household shops or “shadow

¹⁶⁹ Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 59.

¹⁷⁰ United States Army Air Forces, *Third Report of the Commanding General of the Army Air Forces to the Secretary of War, November 12, 1945* (Baltimore: Schneidereith & Sons, 1945), 37; “21st Bomber Command Tactical Mission Report 40,” JAR.

¹⁷¹ *Phase Analysis: Incendiary Operations*, JAR.

¹⁷² *Phase Analysis: Incendiary Operations*, JAR.

factories.”¹⁷³ The attack on Tokyo on March 9-10 therefore “embodied a complete change of tactics” LeMay’s adjustments led to better weather and cloud conditions, better use of radar equipment since scope definition was clearer at lower altitudes, greater bomb loads, improved maintenance, and greater bombing accuracy.¹⁷⁴

In keeping with precision doctrine, U.S. bombers had targeted industrial and economic systems first, then Japanese aircraft factories, and select targets and urban areas last.¹⁷⁵ But when LeMay decided to launch low-level incendiary attacks at night, he abandoned precision bombing. That did not happen without some significant moral self-deception. “These operations were not conceived as terror raids against the civilian population,” LeMay insisted, because attacks on Tokyo’s urban area were still attacks on Japan’s economic and industrial capacity to make war.¹⁷⁶ Japanese industry depended on thousands of small subcontractors that each contained a small number of workers next-door to major factories. This feeder industry produced vital components for the larger factories which assembled the end products for the Japanese war machine. By destroying this feeder system, the U.S. would not only stop the flow of parts and the process of industrial production, but dislocate Japan’s labor forces, overwhelm its transportation facilities, reduce standards of living, and lower Japanese morale and the will to fight.¹⁷⁷ It would also kill thousands of Japanese civilians. LeMay observed that “A general conflagration in a city like Tokyo or Nagoya might have the further advantage of spreading to some of the priority targets” which would preclude the need for “separate pinpoint attacks.”¹⁷⁸ The Tactical Mission Report explained that the object of the Tokyo mission

¹⁷³ United States, Army Air Forces, Personal Narratives Division, *Combat Air Forces of World War II, Army of the United States*, 90.

¹⁷⁴ 21st Bomber Command Tactical Mission Report 40; 497 Bomb Group, Mission Report 29, Tokyo City, 9 March 1945, JAR.

¹⁷⁵ Hansell, *The Strategic Air War Against Germany and Japan*, 175, 177.

¹⁷⁶ *Phase Analysis: Incendiary Operations*, JAR.

¹⁷⁷ Curtis E. LeMay, “B-29 Campaign in the Pacific,” undated, JAR.

¹⁷⁸ *Phase Analysis: Incendiary Operations*, JAR.

“was not to bomb indiscriminately civilian populations. The object was to destroy the industrial and strategic targets concentrated in the urban areas.”¹⁷⁹ To keep up the appearances of precision doctrine, therefore, the mission targets were listed as precise objects, from engineering works to oil companies, railroads, and markets, but the mission always aimed to spread as much destruction as possible. Everyone knew who the bombs were falling on. For LeMay, the proximity of Japan’s urban population to Japan’s industrial targets was a military advantage for the United States not a moral risk to avoid, and LeMay worried primarily about whether the attack would succeed and place bombs on target.

Privately, he felt confident in his plans, but LeMay made all these changes without telling General Arnold of the details. He did notify Washington of his plans on March 8, the day before the raid, but he knew that Arnold and Norstad were out of town that day.¹⁸⁰ When they learned of the results of the Tokyo raid, U.S. strategists were amazed and thrilled. Operation Meetinghouse succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations and, rather than expressing remorse for the lives lost or regret for the necessity of evil, U.S. commanders saw the raid as an achievement not an atrocity, and they expressed congratulations, not compunction. In the days after the attack, LeMay noted in his diary that the night bombing of Tokyo was “the largest and most successful to date... The heart of this city is completely gutted by fire. It is the most devastating raid in the history of aerial warfare.”¹⁸¹ He further reported that the nighttime incendiary attacks also raised the morale of bomber crews. Improved weather, fewer casualties, and better results dramatically decreased flying personnel disorders like psychoneurosis, anxiety, and flying fatigue.¹⁸² LeMay’s superiors in the

¹⁷⁹ 21st Bomber Command Tactical Mission Report 40, JAR.

¹⁸⁰ Werrell, *Blankets of Fire*, 225–26; Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 126; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 173–74.

¹⁸¹ Curtis E. LeMay Daily Diary, 1944-1945, JAR.

¹⁸² *Phase Analysis: Incendiary Operations*, JAR.

Army Air Force were ecstatic with the operation and fully endorsed his new tactics and methods, believing that razing Japan could induce Japanese leaders to surrender, neutralizing the need for invasion.¹⁸³ Meanwhile, U.S. newspapers reported the physical devastation of Tokyo but not the civilian deaths and they included maps of the city but no photographs.¹⁸⁴ Maps and images indicated that “something over half of Tokyo is now gone,” Norstad told LeMay in April. The attacks on Tokyo had been “among the most effective in the entire history of bombing. Keep up the good work.”¹⁸⁵ The attack on Tokyo and the wider bombing campaign had proved the effectiveness of air power and incendiaries and the superiority of area bombing in Japan, and nothing more mattered.

By the end of the month, LeMay’s 21st Bomber Command had carried out five incendiary night attacks against urban areas which destroyed thirty-two square miles of Japan.¹⁸⁶ Norstad told LeMay that the attacks in March had “opened up an entirely new field in strategic bombardment operations. Well done.”¹⁸⁷ General Arnold commended LeMay similarly.¹⁸⁸ General Hansell complimented LeMay as well: “The decision to go into Japan at such low altitude, at night, was certainly a very courageous one, but obviously it was a correct one. Personally, I believe we will have to return to daylight bombing of selected targets, before we beat the Japanese down to the level needed. However, the successful bombing and burning of the great population centers has certainly offered a tremendous contribution.”¹⁸⁹ From China, General Claire Chennault said the same. The twin decisions, “to use incendiaries en masse and to go in low, must have cost you a good many sleepless nights,” he wrote, but they had proven to be “brilliantly wise,” and Chennault commended

¹⁸³ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 365.

¹⁸⁴ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 175.

¹⁸⁵ Lauris Norstad to Curtis E. LeMay, April 18, 1945, JAR.

¹⁸⁶ XXI Bomber Command Monthly Activity Report, April 5, 1945, JAR.

¹⁸⁷ Lauris Norstad to Curtis LeMay, undated, JAR.

¹⁸⁸ DEPCOMAF 20 POA to 21 BOMCOM, undated, JAR.

¹⁸⁹ H. S. Hansell to Curtis E. LeMay, March 29, 1945, JAR.

LeMay and his crews for “visibly shortening the war.”¹⁹⁰ In Japan, however, Domei, the official Japanese news agency, called LeMay the “diabolic destroyer” of Japanese culture.¹⁹¹

The attack on Tokyo thus killed precision bombing as well. LeMay concluded that “Precision attacks from 25,000 feet or above against pinpoint targets are unsuited to operations in this theater.” He argued that incendiary attacks should be the new standard operating procedure because of their military and psychological value and his superiors agreed.¹⁹² The firebombing attacks on Tokyo and other major cities in March 1945 convinced Arnold and other leaders to endorse area bombing with incendiaries “to the near exclusion of selective targeting.” Hansell maintained that LeMay did not completely lose sight of precision bombing because he attacked Japanese aircraft and engine plants “whenever the weather appeared favorable,” but that merely highlights how non-existent moral considerations were in LeMay’s thinking.¹⁹³ Making operational decisions based on weather conditions is not a morally doctrinaire stance.

In retrospect, the firebombing of Tokyo on March 9-10 looks like the high point of the strategic bombing campaign but, in many ways, it was only the beginning. After Tokyo, “the air campaign to destroy urban industrial areas vital to Japan’s ability to carry on the war continued by night and by day until the day of capitulation.”¹⁹⁴ General David A. Burchinal later recalled, “It was just max effort from there on out to knock the Japanese out of the war. Night and day.”¹⁹⁵

As air power strategists prepared for the final defeat of Japan, they continued to think of the B-29 Superfortress as a silver bullet and believed that strategic bombing could fulfill all American

¹⁹⁰ C. L. Chennault to Curtiss E. LeMay, July 9, 1945, JAR.

¹⁹¹ James D. Garcia to Commanding General, XXI Bomber Command, April 7, 1945, JAR.

¹⁹² *Phase Analysis: Incendiary Operations*, JAR.

¹⁹³ Hansell, *The Strategic Air War Against Germany and Japan*, 229, 231-232.

¹⁹⁴ United States, Army Air Forces, *Third Report of the Commanding General of the Army Air Forces to the Secretary of War, November 12, 1945*, 37.

¹⁹⁵ Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 65.

objectives. LeMay and others regarded the firebombing campaign as an all-purpose strategy for destroying Japanese capacity and civilization, abolishing Japanese will and resistance, terrorizing Japanese civilians, and coercing Japan's surrender. By the summer of 1945, strategists believed that air power could do everything.

U.S. strategists still argued, however, about targets and debated whether bombing should prioritize Japan's capability or its will to fight. LeMay targeted Japanese morale and will too, of course, but he expected to win by destroying Japan's capacity to resist and he believed that he had the power to totally destroy Japan's means for war in six months.¹⁹⁶ The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey explained though, that while U.S. air operations in the Pacific impacted "the enemy's military and economic capabilities for resisting, only by translating these military and economic effects into political events could our announced war aim of unconditional surrender be realized." The main purpose of the bombing campaign during the war's terminal summer, therefore, was "to induce responsible Japanese leaders to admit defeat... at the earliest moment." To coerce Japan's surrender, U.S. air forces targeted military and economic industries, but the effects were aimed at the Japanese high command. Military and political targets thus became linked. As the Bombing Survey later explained, in total war "the nature of the political target is linked to the political structure and the spirit of the enemy," and the political target comprised "a ganglion of Army, Navy, government and Imperial household factions which together decided major questions of national policy."¹⁹⁷

Since Japan's will to resist became the top target of American attacks, U.S. strategists recognized that they did not always need to kill Japanese people to achieve their objectives. Incendiary attacks most obviously destroyed Japanese industries and populations, but LeMay also

¹⁹⁶ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 178.

¹⁹⁷ *United States Strategic Bombing Survey: Japan's Struggle to End the War*, July 1, 1946, 1, 31-32; Other Files, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

wanted “to capitalize on the fear generated by his firebombing to disrupt industry and the social infrastructure without killing everyone.”¹⁹⁸ In the words of the Strategic Bombing Survey, “It was not necessary for us to burn every city, to destroy every factory, to shoot down every airplane or sink every ship, and starve the people. It was enough to demonstrate that we were capable of doing all this – that we had the power and the intention of continuing to the end.”¹⁹⁹

As a result, firebombing turned into explicit terror bombing, even if its direct purpose was still military. LeMay exploited the impact of his attacks by dropping leaflets that announced which Japanese cities were targeted for annihilation in the coming days which utterly disrupted Japan’s industries as thousands fled their homes. LeMay’s leaflets functioned as both humanitarianism and terrorism. The leaflets helped reduce Japanese casualties by warning them and giving them time to flee but the leaflets also terrified Japanese civilians. American aircrews naturally did not like warning Japanese cities, however, because any target that was forewarned was also forearmed.²⁰⁰

Even the leaflets and warnings, however, did not always save Japanese civilians from firebombing. In fact, the Fifth Air Force declared that there were no longer civilians in Japan since the Japanese had organized the People’s Volunteer Corps which made all men from fifteen to sixty, and women from seventeen to forty, subject to defense duties. This announcement led to at least two cases of U.S. fighters strafing Japanese civilians although the Army Air Forces ignored data on civilian casualties. American casualties, in contrast, received lots of attention since the raids were connected in everyone’s minds with the invasion of Japan.

¹⁹⁸ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 176–77.

¹⁹⁹ *United States Strategic Bombing Survey: Japan’s Struggle to End the War*, July 1, 1946, 33; Other Files, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

²⁰⁰ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 364; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 176–77; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 171.

In spite of Japanese losses over the previous three years and the material superiority of the United States, it was LeMay's bombing campaign that overwhelmed Japanese censorship and propaganda and plunged defeat home to the Japanese. If the Battle of Leyte Gulf signified the military defeat of Japan, LeMay's firebombing campaign signified the major material and psychological defeat for Japan, even though it did not denote the official end of the war. American bombing attacks destroyed Japan's industrial-military power until, by August 1945, "The only war activity in the home islands retaining any efficacy was preparation to resist invasion."²⁰¹

The moral of the strategic bombing story, therefore, is that U.S. strategists abandoned precision doctrines and moral considerations in favor of maximum results. The United States did not live up to the letter and spirit of precision bombing because by 1945 no one in Washington really cared. Morality did not save Tokyo or Japan because it was less important than efficiency and effectiveness when it came to prosecuting and winning the war.²⁰² General Burchinal later explained, "Our doctrine had always been to hit a target and keep hitting it until it disappeared." LeMay added, "what we were trying to do was make maximum use of the tools we had, to get the maximum use out of them; tactics and everything went out the window," including morality.²⁰³

LeMay was never irritated by ethical considerations anyway and, among major strategists, only Stimson expressed any anxieties about the morality of the Tokyo mission. By and large, U.S. strategists decided, more by experience than theory or doctrine, that non-combatant deaths were unavoidable in the drive to destroy Japan's capacity and will for war. They insisted that Japanese workers were belligerents because they furthered Japan's capacity to make war, making them fair game for American incendiaries.²⁰⁴ U.S. strategists were also willing to kill Japanese civilians to

²⁰¹ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 309.

²⁰² Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 8, 173.

²⁰³ Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 67-68.

²⁰⁴ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 173, 176, 179.

forestall an invasion and save American lives. If they did hold any ethical regard for the lives of others, the fact that they did not factor into U.S. decision-making indicates that Japanese lives were so far down the hierarchy of values that those concerns effectively did not exist. The top priority was to win the war and U.S. strategists accepted whatever civilian casualties were necessary to achieve victory.

WHEN THE BOMBING STOPPED

Americans are accustomed to thinking of the atomic bombs as the last military acts of the war – the final straw to break the Japanese back and lead to Tokyo’s surrender and the end of World War II. But the strategic bombing campaign continued, unabated and independent of the atomic bombs, even after Japan had surrendered. Privately, General Carl Spaatz felt reluctant about the indiscriminate killing of civilians, but he had received orders in August to continue bombing until surrender arrangements were completed. He canceled one raid because of bad weather and tried to limit other raids to military targets but, when the press interpreted this as a ceasefire, Truman ordered him to stop bombing altogether to avoid the misperception that the resumption of bombing indicated a breakdown in negotiations. When the Japanese delayed, Truman ordered more attacks and Arnold demanded a maximum effort to demonstrate the power of the Army Air Force (as if its power in the air and over Japanese cities had not been made preposterously obvious already). On August 10, therefore, General Spaatz recommended that U.S. bombers target Tokyo *again*. Since the capital had already been bombed multiple times, the U.S. would likely inflict more destruction on a “clean target,” but the Army Air Force believed that “the psychological effect on the government officials still remaining in Tokio [sic] is more important at this time than destruction.”²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ COMGENAIR to COMGEN USASTAF (personal from Spaatz to Norstad), August 10, 1945, JAR.

When President Truman announced Japan's surrender on August 14, B-29s were landing in the Marianas after completing the final bombing of the war involving a "maximum effort attack against Japan." For twenty-four hours before the cessation of hostilities, a force of nearly 1,000 planes – 833 Superfortresses and 175 fighter planes, involving 9,174 crew members – attacked targets throughout Honshu. The combined missions dropped more than 5,500 tons of bombs on military targets like the Hikari naval arsenal and the Osaka army arsenal, but they also hit railroad yards and oil facilities as well as the urban areas of Kumagaya and Isesaki.²⁰⁶ The Army Air Force insisted, untruthfully, that "no bomb was dropped subsequent to the proclamation" and, once Japan surrendered, the strategic bombing campaign finally ended.²⁰⁷

For U.S. strategists, Japan's surrender vindicated the doctrine of air power. Measured by the campaign's goals, strategic bombing was an enormous success. The bombing destroyed Japan's capacity for war and made American victory decisive, shortened the war, and limited U.S. casualties. LeMay and his bombers had proven that conventional bombing could effectively defeat enemy nations and that adequate accuracy was possible (but unnecessary). B-29s and incendiaries both served as silver bullets that won the war at minimal cost, and research on better bombs – more accurate and more destructive – culminated in the atomic bombs, the technological, logical, and moral extension of firebombing. When the bombing stopped, however, the ethical implications of strategic bombing were neither studied nor really acknowledged.²⁰⁸

For Japan, the U.S. strategic bombing campaign in World War II was perhaps the greatest catastrophe in Japanese history. In economic terms, the campaign completely crippled Japan's

²⁰⁶ Lists of XX/XXI Bomber Command Tactical Mission Reports, JAR.

²⁰⁷ J. B. Montgomery memorandum for the Chief of Staff, "Brief Summary of Strategic Air Operations Against Japan," August 26, 1945, JAR; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 180, 183-184.

²⁰⁸ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 365; Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 127, 296; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 116, 191.

capacity to make war. Although it was overshadowed by the explosive results of strategic bombing, the Army Air Force also carried out “the most intensive [strategic] mining campaign in the history of warfare.” B-29s dropped 12,049 mines covering every major port area and shipping lane in Japan and Korea, sunk 770,000 tons of shipping and damaged 478,000 tons more.²⁰⁹ Those results meant that the Japanese economy collapsed to the point that surrender may have saved the Japanese islands from starvation. From April 1945 on, Japan began employing all remaining shipping to import food. On land, absenteeism exploded. Knowing that their workplaces had targets all over them, workers failed to show up for shifts.²¹⁰

Statistically, the results of the campaign continue to stupefy. By the time Japan finally surrendered, U.S. bombers had dropped 165,000 tons of bombs and mines on and around the Japanese islands. In fifteen months of operations, the Army Air Forces laid waste to 180 square miles of Japanese urban industrial area in 66 major cities. In fact, apart from Kyoto, Yokosuka, and Kokura, every major Japanese city was bombed. The Allies dropped nine times more bomb tonnage on Germany, but the combined destruction of Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka exceeded the total destruction of all German cities. The campaign also destroyed 2.5 million buildings including 581 factories and thousands of feeder factories. In their desperation to contain the destruction, the Japanese themselves knocked down half a million homes to create firebreaks.²¹¹

On top of all that, there was the human cost. Japanese reports actually diminished the destruction from the bombing, but the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey recorded that the campaign killed 330,000 people, injured 476,000, and created 8.5 million refugees as a quarter of Japan’s entire

²⁰⁹ Curtis E. LeMay, “B-29 Campaign in the Pacific,” undated; J. B. Montgomery memorandum for the Chief of Staff, “Brief Summary of Strategic Air Operations Against Japan,” August 26, 1945, JAR.

²¹⁰ Werrell, *Blankets of Fire*, 234–35.

²¹¹ Curtis E. LeMay, “B-29 Campaign in the Pacific,” undated; J. B. Montgomery memorandum for the Chief of Staff, “Brief Summary of Strategic Air Operations Against Japan,” August 26, 1945, JAR; Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 126; Werrell, *Blankets of Fire*, 226–227.

urban population were forced from their homes. In all, U.S. strategic bombing left 22 million Japanese dead, injured, or homeless.²¹²

However, “the true destructive capacity of airpower was not clear to leaders until they visited conquered enemy cities.”²¹³ During the first week in September, as the government of Japan formally surrendered to the United States in Tokyo Bay, General LeMay traveled to Japan and took a three-hour flight up and down the coast “viewing the results of the incendiary strikes he had directed against Japanese targets.”²¹⁴ What a trip that must have been! LeMay and others flew over Tokyo, Yokohama, Shizuoka, Hamamatsu, Nagoya, Okazaki, and other target cities and observed the destruction for themselves from 100-500 feet in the air. Each city looked like “a city dump” – the destruction almost defied description, one officer reported. From close range, they determined that their previous estimates of the bombing damage had been too conservative by at least thirty percent. The officers still referred to the incendiary attacks on arsenals, refineries, and industrial plants in Japanese cities as precision attacks, however. An observer wrote:

The absence of human life, the complete devastation of economic activity, the lethargic failure of the civilians and military of these cities to make an appreciable effort to resume even a degree of normal living testifies vividly to the efficacy of strategic bombardment. These factories and cities – all targets of our suprefortresses [sic] – are dead, blackened skeletons that serve as forceful reminders of the skill of our airmen, the efficiency of their planes and the air contribution to victory.²¹⁵

Truly, the conventional bombing campaign against Japan was the atomic bomb before the atomic bombs. Today, nuclear weapons have become regarded as unspeakable horrors and inherently immoral by virtue of their tremendous explosive power and psychological impact but, in World War II, there was little difference between destroying cities by atomic or incendiary bombs

²¹² Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 126; Werrell, *Blankets of Fire*, 227; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 151; Tirman, *The Deaths of Others*, 55.

²¹³ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 188.

²¹⁴ Curtis E. LeMay Daily Diary, 1944-1945, JAR.

²¹⁵ COMGEN, USASTAF to CO, Hamilton Field, September 1945, JAR.

and LeMay's firebombing of Tokyo ultimately paved the technological and moral path to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.²¹⁶

For the United States, in comparison, the military cost of the bombing campaign was "phenomenally low." In all the missions flown against Japan, the Army Air Force lost 485 B-29s and 212 fighters totaling 3,041 combat crew personnel killed or missing and 332 injured.²¹⁷

For families whose loved ones never came home, however, the losses were still more than they could bear, and many Americans focused more on American casualties than Japanese destruction. Margaret Mouser, from Flint, Michigan, wrote to General LeMay on June 19, 1945, and told him "Today has been the hardest day in my life." Her family had just received word that her brother, Lt. Selden G. Mouser, "a pilot on one of your B-29s" had been lost in one of the low-altitude raids at the end of May. Margaret wrote:

They may have not seemed a great loss to you and the 20th Air Force but the loss to our family is so great. We were such a close family. My mom, dad, sister, brother, and myself. We cannot tell my sister because she is expecting a baby and we can't take the chance of killing her too. We will not give up hope of his return although he might just as well be dead as be taken a prisoner of the Japs.

For the loss of her brother, Margaret blamed LeMay. "I feel indirectly that it is your fault," she wrote to the general. If it was not, "you should have a chance to say so," because if her brother did not return, she would harbor "hatred in my heart for you."²¹⁸

LeMay replied on July 7 and said he "keenly realized" the Mousers' heartache. "No man likes war," he wrote, but "ever since the foul Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, we have been pursuing the grim business of war, necessarily decreed by our people through the Congress." He further

²¹⁶ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 187–88.

²¹⁷ Curtis E. LeMay, "B-29 Campaign in the Pacific," undated, JAR. Col. John B. Montgomery reported that the U.S. lost 437 B-29s and 297 combat crews.

²¹⁸ Margaret Mouser to General LeMay, June 19, 1945, JAR.

explained that the B-29 missions were “planned and executed to destroy the enemy’s ability to carry on the war” and the altitude for each attack was carefully determined after studying each objective and considering “the safety of the men.” The low-level bombing attacks that led to Lt. Mouser’s missing, had also wreaked havoc on the enemy’s war production “thus resulting in the saving of countless American lives. Unfortunately, aerial warfare bears to immunity to the hazards of battle” and despite all the safeguards to protect American crews, “casualties are sustained.” LeMay concluded with his condolences:

I realize nothing can be done or said to take the place of your brother in his family. The love and affection for members of one’s family constitute the foundation of the American home and the greatness of our nation. I do hope, however, that some solace may be had in the knowledge that Selden has played a salient role by the means of his own choosing in striking a vital blow to the heart of our enemy. Please permit me to extend my sympathy to you and other members of Selden’s family and express the hope that Selden may yet return to you.²¹⁹

Given the staggering amounts of destruction that U.S. bombers exacted of Japan, American commanders unsurprisingly credited the U.S. Army Air Force and its bombing campaign for defeating Japan although they argued that the campaign’s greatest impact was psychological. The Deputy Chief of Staff for the 20th Air Force, Colonel John B. Montgomery, concluded that “This cumulative destruction, against which no appreciable defense was ever achieved, undeniably impressed upon the Jap mind the fact that the force of Allied might was irresistible, which fact contributed immeasurably to the surrender decision.”²²⁰ In spite of Japanese defeats and setbacks over the course of the Pacific War and the United States’ overwhelming material superiority, it was the bombing of the home islands that ultimately swamped Japanese censorship, propaganda, and patriotism and drove the reality of the war and Japan’s defeat home. Like the inescapable *Adrasteia* or *Nemesis*, the bombing of Japan demonstrated with terrifying and undeniable clarity to Japanese

²¹⁹ Curtis E. LeMay to Margaret Mouser, July 7, 1945, JAR.

²²⁰ J. B. Montgomery memorandum for the Chief of Staff, “Brief Summary of Strategic Air Operations Against Japan,” August 26, 1945, JAR.

leaders and the public that Japan was utterly helpless before the inexorable American war machine.²²¹

In their memoirs, therefore, U.S. commanders frequently quoted Japanese leaders like Admiral Asami Nayamo, Vice Admiral Shigeru Fukudome, and Prince Fumimaro Konoye who claimed that the strategic bombing campaign won the war for the United States.²²² Strategic airpower worked, General Haywood Hansell argued in his memoir. Japan's defeat proved that air forces could win wars all on their own. Without suffering an invasion and with its armies still intact, Japan surrendered because of the overwhelming power of America's air forces. Hansell wrote:

Devastated and its will broken, Japan could not wage war nor protect its people. Unquestionably the Japanese could have continued to resist, killing thousands of invading Americans and losing thousands of their own. But the potency of the air offensive convinced the Japanese that defense against it was impossible and resistance futile. Even more important, I believe Japan could have been defeated without widespread urban destruction.²²³

So great was their faith in airpower that Arnold and others argued that the United States could have won without an invasion or the atomic bombs. Arnold claimed the U.S. air forces could have doubled the total tonnage dropped on Japan in the three months before the Kyushu invasion in November 1945.²²⁴ Hansell even thought the U.S. could have won without area bombing. He criticized army leaders who regarded invasion as "the sine qua non of victory," and complained that Washington was too concerned with the timing of victory and shortening the war. Hansell asserted, "there should have been no limitation on strategic operations dictated by the shortage of time. Time was on our side." With every passing day, he wrote, American blockade, mining, and bombing operations brought Japan closer to disaster and defeat. He thought selected bombing had been decisive in Germany and that it could have been decisive against Japan. A ground invasion was not

²²¹ Werrell, *Blankets of Fire*, 241.

²²² Hansell, *The Strategic Air War Against Germany and Japan*, 257.

²²³ Hansell, 263-264.

²²⁴ Hansell, 252-253.

necessary, he contended, because “invasion was merely a form of compelling and not an end in itself.” Hansell further explained,

We did not want to hold Japanese territory permanently. If this had been our aim, invasion would have been a must. The Japanese would not have surrendered even after the atomic bombings, had our purpose been to dismember their nation. What we wanted was to prevent the Japanese expansion, strip Japan of its conquests, and remove the menace of Japanese aggression from the Pacific basin. We needed to exert a compelling force to this end, and it could be imposed by sea blockade and air bombardment as well as by invasion.²²⁵

In his memoir, Hansell even outlined an alternative grand strategy for World War II in which U.S. air forces defeated Germany and Japan through precision bombing attacks although he would have prepared for incendiary and atomic attacks of Japanese urban areas, if necessary, occupation if Japan surrendered, and invasion if all else failed.²²⁶

Since neither an invasion nor area bombing was necessary to defeat Japan, Hansell claimed, the deaths of Japanese civilians were immoral and unjustified. He maintained that “The destruction of the cities and the enormous loss of Japanese civilian lives were in no sense an objective of the United States Government or of the strategic air offensive. They were means toward achieving the ultimate goal – capitulation of the Japanese Government.” Destroying Japan’s cities was not only unnecessary during the war, he went on, but it imposed an enormous reconstruction burden on the United States after the war. Moreover, there was no compensation for “the excessive loss of life.”²²⁷

Hansell was one of the few commanders to address some of the enormous moral dilemmas that strategic bombing raised, however. Most U.S. strategists ignored or sidestepped awkward moral questions instead of engaging them.²²⁸ Some even tried to hide or whitewash them. In a memo to LeMay immediately after the war, Lt. Col. John R. McCrary, a public relations officer for the 20th Air

²²⁵ Hansell, 264-265.

²²⁶ Hansell, 269.

²²⁷ Hansell, 266.

²²⁸ Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 296.

Force, warned that disclosure of the bombing results would make the air forces look bad. He told LeMay:

if there is any wave of sympathy for the Jap Govt and their troubles with the naughty un-Japanese Kamikazes, it's going to make the announcement of Jap civilian casualties turn against the Air Force. Make us look like barbarians, the Jap govt an injured, innocent body of harmless little brown men. Incidentally, the Nips brought down the complete casualty figures on bombings. Every effort should be made right now to guarantee that Usastaf [United States Strategic Air Forces] release those figures, at the right time. And the right time is after I've collected some atrocity stories about what Japs did to our B-29 crews when they were shot down.²²⁹

Ultimately, the United States' strategic bombing campaign was so successful that that the bombers did not even have to answer the campaign's moral questions. They were able to sidestep the troubling realities of killing hundreds of thousands of Japanese in part because Americans could not see the dead. Even from 5,000 feet, B-29 crews could not see and, therefore, fully know what they were doing. After their missions, the photographs only showed desolate landscapes with empty streets but, by and large, the images showed nothing at all. The bombing was so successful that there was, quite literally, nothing to see. Maps showed the scale of destruction, but there was very little to prick the conscience of American soldiers and strategists. As Richard Overy stated – if an American army had run wild through the streets of Tokyo and murdered 100,000 men, women, and children, the United States would have had to answer for the war crime. But, because the casualties took place from a distance, the U.S. did not have to face its atrocities in the same way. Most importantly, the United States won! Americans did not have to answer for their actions when the ends appeared to justify the means. For U.S. strategists and the wider public, winning meant that Japanese casualties were necessary – tragic, of course, but justified in their minds, perhaps even deserved. However many Japanese sacrifices were required on the altar of victory, U.S. strategists were willing to pay them. Certainly, victory covered a multitude of sins.

²²⁹ John R. McCrary to Gen. LeMay, undated, JAR.

The Road to Berlin and Tokyo

In this section, I argue that unlimited war continued into 1945 as the United States pursued total war to achieve total victory over Germany and Japan. President Roosevelt warned that the road to Berlin and Tokyo would be long and bloody, but there was no question about the decisiveness of America's ultimate victory. After Roosevelt died in April 1945, the new President, Harry S. Truman, continued on the course to total victory, even as German resistance and propaganda led some Americans to question the value and virtue of unconditional surrender. Americans worried that the Casablanca Doctrine was unnecessary and too costly, but the U.S. military insisted that unconditional surrender was vital to prevent another world war. The policy would enable the Allies to eradicate Nazism, control Germany, inculcate psychological defeat, and ensure that American soldiers had not died in vain. While it is true that unconditional surrender played into the hands of German propaganda and Hitler's fatalistic self-destruction, there is no evidence to suggest that the policy prolonged the war or stiffened German resistance. The Allies' willingness to kill and the Germans' willingness to die combined to enact a horrific *Gotterdammerung* in Berlin but neither one caused the other. No matter the cost, U.S. strategists were willing to pay the price of total victory in order to ensure that Germany could not provoke a third world war.

Their will to win was seriously challenged, however, by Japanese resistance in the Pacific. Tokyo still refused to surrender, and Japanese soldiers exacted an appalling price for the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa which presaged American invasions of Kyushu and Honshu. Given Japan's unconquerable spirit, the prospect of thousands of American casualties, and the growing domestic discontent for the war's length and costs, U.S. strategists began to rethink what was possible and moral in the Pacific War. In the spring of 1945, the White House and the Pentagon began to

question what victory against Japan meant, how far the United States should be willing to go to achieve it, and thereby reevaluated their definitions of and strategies for, victory.

TOTAL VICTORY IN 1945

Even as squadrons of B-29s pulverized Japanese cities in 1944-1945, the advance against Japanese territories was slow and painful but, although General Marshall admitted that victory over Japan seemed distant, as 1945 began, U.S. strategists doubled down on their ends and means.¹ In his State of the Union Address in January 1945, President Roosevelt reiterated the demand for unconditional surrender and stated “This war must be waged – it is being waged – with the greatest and most persistent intensity. Everything we are and have is at stake. Everything we are and have will be given.”² The basic plan for Japan’s defeat remained unchanged. At the Malta and Yalta Conferences in January and February, the U.S. Chiefs of Staff recapped the program for victory. To force Japan’s unconditional surrender “at the earliest possible date,” U.S. forces would reduce Japan’s capacity and will to resist through continued blockades, bombardments, and the destruction of Japanese air and naval power. By “continuous and unremitting pressure,” these operations would enable the U.S. to invade Japan itself.³ Until then, the Chiefs agreed that future Pacific operations would try to avoid “full-scale land battles” that would produce heavy casualties and slow the momentum of Allied victory.⁴ In this way, the U.S. could defeat Japan quickly and at minimal cost, without sacrificing the demands for total victory. As Raymond P. Ludden and John S. Service explained in a memorandum on February 14 to General Albert Wedemeyer, the leader of U.S. forces in China, the only immediate objective for the Far East was to defeat Japan in the shortest possible

¹ *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939-30 June 1945* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1996), 155, 171.

² Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Address,” January 6, 1945, APP.

³ *FRUS, Diplomatic Papers, Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945*, nos. 266, 345, 419.

⁴ *FRUS, Diplomatic Papers, Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945*, no. 309.

time with the least loss of American lives; everything else was subordinate to winning the war at the cheapest cost.⁵

In his address to Congress on the Yalta Conference one month later, Roosevelt repeated the demands for total victory: “There will be no respite for [the Axis]. We will not desist for one moment until unconditional surrender,” he proclaimed. He warned Americans again that the war against Japan would be long and costly but, if the United States wanted to achieve its goals, they had no other choice than to prosecute the conflict to its bitter, bloody end. “It is still a long, tough road to Tokyo. It is longer to go to Tokyo than it is to Berlin, in every sense of the word,” the president declared. “The defeat of Germany will not mean the end of the war against Japan. On the contrary, we must be prepared for a long and costly struggle in the Pacific... But the unconditional surrender of Japan is as essential as the defeat of Germany.” If American plans for world peace were to succeed, “Japanese militarism must be wiped out as thoroughly as German militarism.”⁶ But American plans for peace were predicated on strategies that made the Pacific War more unlimited and turned the year from the summer of 1944 to the summer of 1945 into a “killing year.”⁷

Even after President Roosevelt died in the spring of 1945, the United States government remained committed to total victory and unconditional surrender because the succeeding administration vowed to stay the course. Admittedly, it would have been difficult to adapt American grand strategy since Roosevelt passed away on April 12, in the middle of the Allies’ final push for victory in Germany and just days after the U.S. invasion of Okinawa began. To this day, FDR remains famous as a “political fox” – a resourceful, innovative, improviser and master politician whose talents as a juggler were partly due to the fact that he was neither limited nor compelled by

⁵ *FRUS, Diplomatic Papers, 1945, The Far East, China*, vol. VII, no. 157.

⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address to Congress on the Yalta Conference,” March 1, 1945, APP.

⁷ Dower, *War without Mercy*, 299.

any “central conviction or purpose.” The one conviction in which Roosevelt was consistently consistent was his determination to achieve total victory at the lowest cost in American lives. It would fall to his vice president, Harry S. Truman, to preside over total victory, but Truman immediately assumed the mantle of Dr. Win the War and, despite having to change war horses midstream, the new administration did not miss a beat. Roosevelt did not pass the torch to the new president very well, but Truman essentially retained Roosevelt’s attitudes and ethics about the end of the war.⁸ In his first meeting with the Secretaries of War and the Navy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Truman was content to continue Roosevelt’s plans to defeat Germany and Japan and, in the following weeks, the new president repeated his predecessor’s aims about winning the war and winning the peace and extended Lend-Lease which Truman credited with helping the United Nations achieve victory with the least cost in lives.⁹ In his first presidential address before Congress on April 16, Truman acknowledged that his administration was “deeply conscious” of the “hard fighting” that lay ahead for American soldiers but he restated Roosevelt’s hardline about unconditional surrender:

Having to pay such a heavy price to make complete victory certain, America will never become a party to any plan for partial victory! To settle for merely another temporary respite would surely jeopardize the future security of all the world. Our demand has been, and it remains – Unconditional Surrender! We will not traffic with the breakers of the peace on the terms of the peace.

⁸ Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 5, 20, 26–29; for a more complete account of the presidential transition between Roosevelt and Truman, see Wilson D. Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 8–9; Herring, *The American Century and Beyond, U.S. Foreign Relations, 1893-2015*, 289.

⁹ Harry S. Truman, “Remarks Upon Receiving an Honorary Degree From the University of Kansas City,” June 28, 1945; “Statement by the President Upon Signing Bill Extending the Lend-Lease Act,” April 17, 1945, APP.

Winning the war quickly and at minimal cost in American lives remained a major concern as well, though. “All of us are praying for a speedy victory,” the President declared, “Every day peace is delayed costs a terrible toll.”¹⁰

GERMANY’S UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

The United States and its allies remained determined to do whatever it took to complete Germany’s defeat though and refused to compromise their victory. During the previous summer, Allied progress indicated that Germany’s ultimate defeat was only a matter of time. The Allies entered Rome and invaded Normandy, while the Red Army surged into Central Europe which raised the possibility of negotiating a peace without total victory or defeat. However, the Allies refused to negotiate through a neutral power like the Vatican and rejected appeals to Pope Pius XII because they would only accept peace through victory.¹¹

As Germany’s total defeat neared in the spring of 1945, the Truman administration continued to demand the unconditional surrender of the Third Reich. To clarify the policy’s meaning for U.S. Army officers and to counter the enemy’s criticisms, the War Department issued an orientation fact sheet that justified unconditional surrender. Too many American soldiers, it stated, did not understand that unconditional surrender was necessary and decisive and *was not* costly. It was “a prerequisite to a real and lasting peace” and it would not cost more American lives. Unconditional surrender also did not mean a “hard peace” or the annihilation of the German nation or people, but the Axis surrender still had to be unconditional in order to avoid World War III.¹²

¹⁰ Harry S. Truman, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” April 16, 1945, APP.

¹¹ Herbert L. Matthews, “Peace Views Of Vatican Contrary To Allied Aims,” *NYT*, July 16, 1944.

¹² “Army Talk: Orientation Fact Sheet 62, Unconditional Surrender – A United Nations Policy,” March 10, 1945; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

First, to preclude another world war, Nazism and fascism had to be eradicated. The War Department therefore rejected a negotiated peace because it would allow “history’s most infamous war criminals” who had not abandoned their fascist, militaristic dreams of world domination to draft a peace agreement. “If this War ends with any nucleus of fascism remaining in existence, we will have to live in constant dread of an inevitable World War III,” the fact sheet explained. A satirical poem by C. W. W. from the *New York Herald Tribune* was included to make the point:

Be gentle to the Germans,
Now we’ve got them on the run,
Do not say or do a thing
To irritate the Hun;
Forget about Lidice,
Laugh off the rocket gun.

Remember German people
Were cruelly misled,
Of course we mustn’t hate them;
Be kind to them instead –
What’s a little matter
Of twenty million dead?

These humane, peace-loving people
Deserve our charity,
So let us all extend to them
The hand of sympathy:
Help them prepare to murder us
In nineteen sixty-three.

Unconditional surrender was also necessary to control Germany. Because World War I had not ended with Germany’s unconditional surrender, the Allies were unable to control defeated Germany which allowed it to start another world war twenty years later. Now, to avoid a third world war in another twenty years, the Allies had to prevent future aggression. Without unconditional surrender, the Nazi movement could go underground, fascist teachers could thwart Allied reeducation plans, and German industrialists could secretly manufacture weapons for another war. In those circumstances, the U.S. would have to stay on economic war footing which would increase taxes at home and require the maintenance of military forces in peacetime. As the fact sheet stated,

unconditional surrender would give the U.S. “freedom of action not only to set any terms we deem necessary, but to solve any future problems which may arise.”

Critics contended that “the Allies could end the war right away and save lives by negotiating a peace,” but the War Department insisted that a negotiated peace was the same as an armistice because “It would not give us the freedom of action necessary to destroy German militarism and fascism and thus eradicate the sources of World War III.” A negotiated peace would not allow the Allies to break up the German General Staff, to remove or destroy German military equipment, to eliminate or reform Germany’s industrial war potential, to destroy the Nazi party, laws, organizations, and institutions, or to remove Nazi, militarist, and Junker influences from German economic and cultural life.

At bottom, the fact sheet reported, “Our objective is to be in complete control of the military, political, economic, and social life of the conquered country. That is fundamental. We can have that complete control only by unconditional surrender or by complete annihilation of the enemy.” Of course, as Roosevelt had repeatedly announced, the Allies did not want to annihilate the German people since unconditional surrender would be less costly in men and materiel for all sides, “But if the Axis will not capitulate unconditionally we must continue until it is utterly destroyed,” the fact sheet clarified. The only alternative to unconditional surrender, therefore, was not negotiation, but annihilation. The Germans would have to choose.

Unconditional surrender would also bring home the psychological defeat of Germany. To avoid another world war, the fact sheet explained, “the German people must know that they have been completely defeated.” Even though the Allies defeated Germany on the battlefield in the First World War, the Germans propagated the myth that they had not lost. The U.S. could not allow that to happen after World War II. “The only way we can be assured that the German people will

recognize that their army has been defeated is to make them yell a long and loud ‘Uncle,’” the fact sheet said. It also quoted Mark Van Doren, the well-known English professor at Columbia University, who wrote that the first step in remaking Germany was:

military defeat – the worst defeat any German ever heard of or imagined. A defeat that no German will ever be able to minimize... The notion that Germany is superior to the rest of the world because she likes war better than the rest of the world, and because in the last analysis it always wins its wars, must literally be beaten to death. We cannot afford to let any German enjoy the memory of World War II, or cherish the illusion that the rest of the world in this war did not prove its military superiority in every particular, and to the hilt.

Unconditional surrender was the only way to accomplish that.

Finally, unconditional surrender would ensure that those who had given their lives to defeat fascism had not died in vain. The fact sheet declared, “Anything short of unconditional surrender would be a criminal betrayal of the millions who died and the millions who still fight, suffer, and sacrifice in the hope of a world free of fascism.” Without unconditional surrender, the war would be “a waste of life and blood.”¹³ Contrary to German propaganda and American pacifists and socialists, therefore, the U.S. military maintained that unconditional surrender was a moral imperative. It would prevent another world war, secure world peace, and give meaning to American deaths.

Moreover, while the Allies’ determination to force Germany’s unconditional surrender was unprecedented and extreme, so was Germany’s determination to never surrender and, despite assertions that unconditional surrender would harden German resistance, Ian Kershaw has shown that Allied policy was not to blame for prolonging the war. He pointed out, “A country defeated in war almost always at some point seeks terms. Self-destruction by continuing to fight on to the last, down to almost total devastation and complete enemy occupation, is extremely rare.” Unconditional surrender was extraordinary because wars between states typically end with negotiated settlements

¹³ “Army Talk: Orientation Fact Sheet 62, Unconditional Surrender – A United Nations Policy,” March 10, 1945; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

and ruling elites usually recognize their defeat and sue for peace to preclude total destruction. But Germany refused to surrender even when it had obviously lost and the Allies had won. By the summer of 1944, Kershaw explains, the western Allies had solidified their foothold in France and the Red Army had penetrated far into Poland, but the German leadership still thought they had something to gain or win from the war. They believed that if they could prolong the conflict the Allies would negotiate a peace settlement to avoid further losses, or they expected the ideological divide between the western democracies and communism would split the anti-Nazi alliance and allow Germany to end the war short of total annihilation. Even after the Allies invaded Germany itself, “The rulers of Germany in 1945, knowing the war was lost and complete destruction beckoned, were nevertheless prepared to fight on until their country was practically obliterated.” Despite the certainty of Allied victory, Hitler continued down the path to personal and national self-destruction. Sequestered in a bunker as the Third Reich came crashing down around him, Hitler’s reality and fantasy became blurred and he refused to surrender, insisting instead on “Destruction with honour” to create a “legend of valour for posterity.” In the end, the personal and structural charismatic leadership of Hitler’s regime allowed him to drag the German people and the nation into the abyss of annihilation.¹⁴ On May 7, 1945, with the Reich in ruins and its Fuhrer dead by suicide, Germany surrendered unconditionally to the Allied forces.

Unconditional surrender undoubtedly “played to [Hitler’s] mentality and convictions” since his intransigence, detachment from reality, and willingness to embrace perdition led him to favor total annihilation over cowardly capitulation. The policy also absolutely fed German propaganda which exploited the terms to encourage the Germans to fight on by claiming that the Allies planned to destroy Germany. But few Germans believed these messages. Furthermore, while unconditional

¹⁴ Kershaw, *The End*, xix, 6, 11, 13–15.

surrender “made it impossible to end the war in the west – which most German leaders, though not Hitler, would have been prepared to negotiate – without also ending it in the east,” it did not lead the German High Command (OKW) to reconsider their strategy after 1943. Although some German generals claimed that the formula prolonged the war and some German soldiers insisted that unconditional surrender motivated them to keep fighting, the High Command ignored the demand and it made no difference to the German determination to continue the war. Unconditional surrender also did not undermine German resistance against Hitler since it did not preclude coup or assassination attempts. Kershaw therefore concludes that unconditional surrender “provides no adequate explanation” for why Germany continued to fight to the death – although it “provided a useful justification for fighting on to the end... it was not the cause of the determination to do so.”¹⁵

If unconditional surrender ultimately required higher casualties, the War Department was willing to pay the price, but the Army’s fact sheet from March 1945 also cited Paul Winkler’s article in the *Washington Post* from January which claimed that unconditional surrender would not only lead to a more decisive victory, but a quicker and less costly one too. As Winkler wrote, Germany hoped that continued resistance and temporary gains, like the Battle of the Bulge, would make the Allies count the cost of the war and eventually allow Germany to win the peace. Germany was therefore more likely to surrender unconditionally and more quickly if they were convinced that the Allies would *not* weaken their demands. Winkler explained, “no matter how long it may take and no matter how many telling blows they may get in before the end, their own will to continue to make the effort of striking future blows will be undermined by the knowledge that they will be without avail.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Kershaw, 7–8, 386–87, 397.

¹⁶ “Army Talk: Orientation Fact Sheet 62, Unconditional Surrender – A United Nations Policy,” March 10, 1945; Unconditional Surrender Folder, Box 9, GMEP, HSTPL.

U.S. forces thus stayed the course and ensured Germany's complete defeat. On May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered unconditionally to the Allies and President Truman announced the victory from the Radio Room at the White House, calling the Allied triumph "a solemn but a glorious hour." Truman celebrated that the "flags of freedom" were flying over Europe once again but acknowledged the terrible price that the Allies had paid to defeat Germany. "Our rejoicing is sobered and subdued by a supreme consciousness of the terrible price we have paid to rid the world of Hitler and his evil band," he declared. In their moment of triumph, the President nevertheless warned that the war was not over. He exhorted Americans not to let their hands grow heavy and called on the country to uphold the war effort until the day of Japan's defeat:

If I could give you a single watchword for the coming months, that word is – work, work, and more work. We must work to finish the war. Our victory is but half-won. The West is free but the East is still in bondage to the treacherous tyranny of the Japanese. When the last Japanese division has surrendered unconditionally, then only will our fighting job be done. . . . I call upon every American to stick to his post until the last battle is won. Until that day, let no man abandon his post or slacken his efforts.

In his formal proclamation, Truman repeated his summons for the crusade against Japan. "The victory won in the West must now be won in the East. The whole world must be cleansed of the evil from which half the world has been freed," he declared.¹⁷

ISLAND-HOPPING 1945

For U.S. forces, however, the closer they came to Tokyo, the more remote victory seemed. In the Pacific, in spite of the tremendous destruction inflicted on Japan from the air and sea, the campaign on the ground continued in the Philippines and from one Pacific island to the next as U.S. forces neared Japan's home islands and took up positions from which to force Japan's final unconditional surrender. The Pacific War had always been characterized by ferocious fighting, but the combat became even more savage during the final year as the U.S. came closer to Japan. The

¹⁷ Harry S. Truman, "Broadcast to the American People Announcing the Surrender of Germany," May 8, 1945, APP.

famous war correspondent, Ernie Pyle, reminded his domestic audience on February 24 that “the Pacific war is gradually getting condensed, and consequently tougher and tougher. The closer we go to Japan itself, the harder it will be.” He further warned, “The Japs are dangerous people and they aren’t funny when they’ve got guns in their hands. It would be tragic for us to underestimate their power to do us damage, or their will to do it. To me it looks like soul-trying days for us in the years ahead.”¹⁸ Even though U.S. airpower allowed U.S. forces to leapfrog islands of “little strategic value” and shorten the war’s timeline, the island campaign continued to dismay U.S. officials because of Japanese resistance and American casualties.¹⁹

In the Philippines, MacArthur remained determined to reconquer all the islands, even though he had no orders to do so. But once again, the Japanese chose death and defeat over retreat or surrender and the campaign in the southern Philippines would continue until the official surrender in the summer of 1945.²⁰

Farther north, U.S. forces moved to capture the island of Iwo Jima, a tiny grain of black sand in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Barely five miles long and two and a half miles wide, the island had no inherent value except that it was 700 miles from Tokyo and U.S. strategists wanted to use it to safeguard the ongoing strategic bombing campaign over Japan.²¹ Iwo Jima looms large in American memories because of the iconic flag-raising that Joe Rosenthal immortalized on February 23, 1945, and the heroic fighting of the Marines. Of the 82 Congressional Medals of Honor awarded to Marines during World War II, 22 were awarded for the 36 days of fighting on Iwo Jima. Part of the reason there was so much heroism was because the fighting was so awful. The Japanese

¹⁸ Pyle and Nichols, *Ernie’s War*, 374–75.

¹⁹ United States, Army Air Forces, Personal Narratives Division, *Combat Air Forces of World War II, Army of the United States*, 12; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 47–48.

²⁰ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 136, 144.

²¹ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 307; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 152.

committed 21,000 soldiers, led by Lt. General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, to defend the island, which was part of Japan's "inner vital defense zone." Knowing that his forces could not defeat the American assault, Kuribayashi resolved to make the fighting so bloody and horrific that the American public would balk at an invasion of the home islands and beg for peace short of unconditional surrender.²² When the invasion began, the Japanese cunningly allowed the Marines to come ashore without any resistance in order to crowd the beaches and then catch as many as they could in a withering crossfire. The Japanese also dug an elaborate system of tunnels and reinforced bunkers to exact as many casualties as possible and fought virtually to the last man which made Iwo Jima the bloodiest battle in the history of the Marines Corps. The American will to win remained intact after the battle but, for the first time in the Pacific, the U.S. suffered more casualties than the Japanese. With more than 26,000 casualties and 6,000 dead – 700 dead Marines for every square mile – the United States certainly paid a high price for an airfield to bomb Japan.²³ Historian Thomas Zeiler, however, determined that the island was worth the cost because the number of American airmen saved by emergency landings on Iwo Jima likely exceeded the number of marines killed.²⁴

Okinawa held more strategic importance as the last stop before the home islands. In fact, for many Japanese, "Okinawa *was* Japan."²⁵ The island was certainly close enough to Japan proper to provide medium bomber and fighter escorts for U.S. forces. It also contained ports, airfields, anchorages, and training grounds for soldiers but these were defended by 100,000 Japanese soldiers. On Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945, 180,000 American soldiers attacked the island, supported by 1,200 ships in the largest fleet assembled by the United States (larger even than the U.S. fleet at

²² Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 154.

²³ Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 389; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 47; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 23.

²⁴ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 150.

²⁵ Ellis M. Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1946), 412.

Normandy). As on Iwo Jima, the Japanese defenders mostly waited for the Americans to evict them from fortified bunkers, tunnels, and caves, and the costs were dreadful. Ernie Pyle insisted that the United States would take Okinawa, “Nobody has any doubt about that,” he told American readers in April; “But we know that we will have to pay for it.”²⁶ Pyle could not have known how true his words would be. He was killed by a Japanese sniper on Okinawa on April 18.²⁷

At sea, the Japanese organized aircraft squadrons into human bombs – the infamous kamikazes – as well as Kikuchi “floating chrysanthemums” attacks and Okha “cherry blossom” suicide rockets. The suicide attacks indicated Japan’s desperation but also their deadly fanaticism. Many of the kamikaze attacks failed, but the strategy still sank thirteen U.S. destroyers and damaged dozens of other ships during the battle. Psychologically, the suicide attacks also befuddled and traumatized American forces and convinced them that Kamikaze pilots had to be drunk, drugged, or crazy, maybe all three. During the battle, 5,000 American sailors were killed and another 5,000 wounded, and the combined U.S. casualties on land and sea exceeded any other battle in the Pacific. By the time the major fighting stopped in late June, nearly all of the Japanese defenders had been killed and between 50,000 and 150,000 noncombatants died as well, including those who committed mass suicide in order to avoid capture by the barbaric Americans whom, they believed, would torture and murder them. American casualties numbered 50,000 to 70,000, and 12,000 died which made Okinawa the bloodiest American battle of the Pacific War, and the second bloodiest of World War II behind the Battle of the Bulge.²⁸

²⁶ Pyle and Nichols, *Ernie’s War*, 402.

²⁷ Pyle and Nichols, 32.

²⁸ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 161, 163, 167; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 390, 392–93; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 47–48; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 30–31.

Okinawa and Iwo Jima both foreshadowed American invasions of Kyushu and Honshu and the ferocity and cost of the fighting frightened Americans.²⁹ If 100,000 Japanese soldiers could exact 50,000 American casualties or more, what could half a million Japanese defenders do? Even though the United States enjoyed a preponderance of power, Japanese resistance camouflaged the asymmetries of Japanese and American strengths to many U.S. strategists.³⁰ Despite leapfrogging across the Pacific, General Marshall reported to Henry Stimson that the advance had still been slow and costly and Japan's final defeat seemed distant.³¹ Even with the United States' "overwhelming concentration of air power and fire power" Marshall reckoned that World War II had been America's costliest war. Army battle deaths after Pearl Harbor exceeded the combined losses of the Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War. Even with island-hopping, the advance across the Pacific cost 3,200 men every month throughout 1944 and, during the first seven months of 1945, as U.S. forces neared Japan, the rate increased to 12,750 men every month. In 44 months of combat, Marshall calculated 4,576 American battle deaths for every month of World War II compared to 3,845 Union and Confederate battle deaths for every one of the 48 months of Civil War fighting.³² The number of American casualties was only likely to increase in the coming months as the United States prepared to invade Japan and U.S. strategists wondered whether their forces could finally defeat Japan and whether the American people would be able to stomach the bloodshed.

²⁹ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 172; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 396; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 180.

³⁰ Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 333.

³¹ *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939-30 June 1945*, 155.

³² *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939-30 June 1945*, 201.

The Conditions of Unconditional Surrender

American decision-making in the summer of 1945 was predicated on six strategic principles which established the military's hierarchy of priorities and values and the logic of its strategies. As outlined by the War Department's Operations and Plans Division (OPD), the first principle stated that "The fundamental objective of the war in the Pacific was the decisive military defeat, or 'unconditional surrender,' of Japan." And the OPD insisted that "The long range American goal of peace in the Pacific should not be jeopardized by permitting the Japanese to make a 'compromise' settlement short of decisive military defeat." The most important objective, therefore, was victory – total, decisive, and uncompromised. Anything short of total victory would mitigate the long-term peace of the Pacific. Of course, the United States still wanted to win decisively *and* quickly *and* at minimum cost, but saving time and American lives was secondary to total victory. The second principle specified that "the defeat of Japan, should be achieved as quickly as possible in order to keep the expenditure of lives and economic resources to an absolute minimum." Every day of the war would cost thousands of American and Japanese lives, enormous American material resources, and "would cause almost irreparable material destruction in Japan." Obviously, U.S. strategists were far more concerned about American men and materiel but the acknowledgement of the toll the war would wreak on Japan implied some regard for the enemy. U.S. strategists noted, thirdly, that victory was inevitable, but Japan would exact and endure the costs of war for as long as they could to make victory as Pyrrhic as possible for the United States. "In time American military strength would destroy all Japanese military capacity for resistance," the OPD explained. But Japan's "last-ditch" defense and suicide tactics in the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa showed that the Japanese were determined to inflict "losses on United States forces at any price." Even though Japanese resistance

was ultimately futile, their defiance in the face of final inescapable defeat would make campaigns in Asia or Japan long and costly.¹

Given these three premises, U.S. strategists determined, fourth, that “A decisive military operation therefore afforded the only certain way of winning the war.” And U.S. strategists believed that “The only operation that inevitably would be decisive would be the invasion of the industrial heart of Japan, the Tokyo Plain area.” As long as Japan continued to resist, the United States would have to utterly “destroy Japan’s military capacity for resistance,” and the only way to do that was to send American soldiers to invade and seize control of the Japanese home islands. U.S. strategists acknowledged a fifth principle, however, that “Japanese will to resist might very well break down before the country’s physical capacity to resist had been completely destroyed.” Accordingly, U.S. strategists determined to employ “Every psychological pressure” to destroy Japan’s will to resist in order to potentially accomplish an early surrender that could save lives and resources. One effective tactic, not so much pressure as persuasion, involved “a definition of ‘unconditional surrender’ which was “clearly preferable to complete military destruction.” Another way to pressure Japan to surrender was to demonstrate “the power and the intent to carry military operations through to the decisive defeat of Japan.” By issuing a warning or an ultimatum that threatened and showed that Japan’s ultimate defeat was inexorable, the United States could compel Japan to surrender. No one could predict when Japan would break, the sixth principle explained – “The time at which Japanese will to resist would break could not be calculated with any precision. But the most optimistic timetable U.S. strategists submitted estimated the end of Japanese resistance in October 1945. “Pessimistic estimates,” on the other hand, “anticipated several years of resistance, perhaps even after a formal surrender by the Japanese Government.” In short, “There was no reliable way of

¹ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb: Summary of Conclusions, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

determining when the war might end, and there certainly was no firm indication that it was about to end in July 1945.”

These six strategic principles established and guided the strategic and moral thinking of American strategists during the summer of 1945. They also led to “a conservative course of action” since “Gambling on an early Japanese surrender would have left the United States war effort bankrupt” if Japan continued its indefatigable resistance. Optimistic military planners had erroneously predicted the collapse of German resistance in the fall of 1944, one year earlier, and few strategists wanted to make the same mistake with Japan. Military and diplomatic officials continued to take steps to persuade or pressure Japan to surrender short of invasion, total destruction, and total defeat, but “American military leaders proceeded with preparations to win the war the hard way.” Therefore, the decision to invade Japan and the decision to drop the atomic bomb were not two different strategies or two separate roads to follow to the same destination. They were the same path to victory and followed the same strategic logic and the same moral considerations – victory at all costs. As the OPD report stated, “The decision concerning the use of the atomic bomb against Japan had to be made, in fact consciously was made, in the light of orthodox strategic thinking and military planning.” Indeed, the report determined that “Since there was no responsible prediction that the war would end before October 1945, the only possible conclusion in July 1945 was that the immediate use of a decisive weapon would shorten the war by at least two months – possibly by years. In this case the principle of economy in lives and resources demanded a decision in favor of the use of the atomic bomb.”²

In this section, I argue that Japan’s obdurate resistance in the Pacific and adamant refusal to surrender succeeded in convincing U.S. strategists to reconsider their commitment to unconditional

² Military Use of the Atomic Bomb: Summary of Conclusions, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

surrender and unlimited war in the spring and summer of 1945. After taking office in April, President Harry S. Truman continued to insist publicly that the United States would never compromise its terms of surrender and demanded that the Japanese forces quit fighting, lay down their arms, and surrender at discretion to the Allies. However, Truman's rhetoric disguised the extent to which Japanese resistance and domestic war-weariness had challenged American attitudes and values about the war. The time and lives it would take to conquer Japan and force its total defeat seemed too long and costly to many Americans and U.S. strategists at the White House and Pentagon began to rethink what was possible and moral in the Pacific War. The casualties that the U.S. had suffered to capture the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa indicated that attacks on Kyushu and Honshu could be intolerably bloody and U.S. strategists began to question the value of victory and whether unconditional surrender was necessary, justified, or even possible in the fight against Japan, and whether it was more important to win decisively, quickly, or at minimal cost.

Consequently, U.S. strategists worked on a "formula" or redefinition of unconditional surrender as well as an ultimatum that was designed to induce Japan's surrender while saving American lives, strengthen America's will to win, and justify unlimited war. While some peace feelers from Tokyo did emerge, Japan's die-hard resistance indicated that the Japanese would not surrender anytime soon and so U.S. strategists formulated a proclamation draft to persuade and threaten Japan into capitulation. Desperate to achieve total victory without enduring the costs of invasion, Secretary of War Henry Stimson proposed to accomplish unconditional surrender without unlimited war by softening America's carrot and sharpening its stick. He offered Tokyo the equivalent of unconditional surrender but suggested Japan could retain its emperor on the one hand, and threatened Japan with total annihilation through the atomic bomb on the other. By cajoling and coercing, Stimson hoped to save American lives without sacrificing total victory. The debates about the extent and value of Japan's surrender that informed the proclamation drafts showed that decisive

victory remained the most important consideration for U.S. strategists but, insofar as their ultimatum was designed to save time and lives as well, it represented another silver bullet that U.S. strategists hoped would satisfy their demands for total victory and assuage their tolerance for the human costs of war.

Some strategists argued, however, that keeping the emperor would contravene the principles of unconditional surrender since the policy intended to break down Japanese government and society so that they could be rebuilt. Indeed, critics contended that retaining Japan's imperial institutions would undermine U.S. objectives and betray American deaths.³ In short, conciliating Japan would save lives but sacrifice victory. By mid-July, as the Truman administration prepared for the Allied conference in Potsdam, the American people had become increasingly weary of war and the Japanese remained defiant in the face of inevitable defeat. U.S. strategists concluded, therefore, that their only chance at unconditional surrender was unlimited war.

TRUMAN'S SPEECHES

By the time Truman succeeded President Roosevelt in April 1945, the United States had publicly called on Japan to surrender for two years. Upon taking office, Truman had repeated Roosevelt's demands for total victory and unconditional surrender in his first presidential address to Congress on April 16 and, when German forces in Italy surrendered, Truman issued a statement on May 2 warning the remaining Axis forces of their impending doom. The United States declared that unless Japanese forces were "lost in fanaticism or determined upon suicide" they had to recognize that the end of the war was near and it would either end in their capitulation or destruction.⁴

³ For concerns about easing surrender demands see John D. Chappell, *Before the Bomb: How America Approached the End of the Pacific War* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1997); Dale M. Hellegers, *We the Japanese People: World War II and the Origins of the Japanese Constitution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁴ Harry S. Truman, "Statement by the President on the Surrender of German Forces in Italy," May 2, 1945, APP.

President Truman thus made it clear that the United States would not settle for anything less than unconditional surrender.

After Germany surrendered unconditionally to the Allies, Truman turned America's will and commitment from Europe to the Pacific and announced, like President Roosevelt, that the United States would fight for the same ends against Japan as against Germany. In a series of public speeches in May and June, Truman reiterated the policy of unconditional surrender and encouraged Americans to give maximum effort to the war. On May 8, when Allied forces finally defeated Germany and declared victory in Europe, the President capitalized on Germany's unconditional surrender and called for the unconditional surrender of Japan again. Now that Nazi Germany had been defeated, it was only a matter of time before the Japanese met the same fate and Truman warned of the casualties and devastation the United States would exact if Japan continued to resist. "So long as their leaders and the armed forces continue the war the striking power and intensity of our blows will steadily increase and will bring utter destruction to Japan's industrial war production, to its shipping, and to everything that supports its military activity," he declared. The longer the war lasted, the more the Japanese people would suffer, and Truman vowed, "Our blows will not cease until the Japanese military and naval forces lay down their arms in unconditional surrender." The president was careful though, to explain what unconditional surrender meant. For the Japanese people, he announced, unconditional surrender meant "the end of the war," the end of their "agony and suffering," and "the termination of the influence of the military leaders who have brought Japan to the present brink of disaster." Surrender also meant that Japanese soldiers could return to their families and homes. In short, unconditional surrender meant the elimination of militarism without "the extermination or enslavement of the Japanese people."⁵ In other words, the U.S. demanded

⁵ Harry S. Truman, "Statement by the President Calling for Unconditional Surrender of Japan," May 8, 1945, APP.

that the Japanese throw themselves on the mercy of the United States. The President promised that the U.S. did not aim to destroy the Japanese nation or people, but U.S. forces were prepared to do so if Japan continued to resist. The Japanese responded with silence, effectively refusing to quit.⁶

On June 1, the President gave a special message to Congress to inform Americans about the price of victory— the human costs that the United States was willing to exact and endure in order to force Japan’s unconditional surrender and win the war. “The primary task facing the Nation today is to win the war in Japan,” Truman began – “to win it completely and to win it as quickly as possible. For every day by which it is shortened means a saving of American lives.”⁷

In Europe, American forces had “absorbed the blows of the German military machine” and “gave their blood to wipe the Nazi terror from the face of the earth.” But despite the victory over Nazi Germany and its allies in Europe, the President warned that “there can be no peace in the world until the military power of Japan is destroyed.” As with Germany, therefore, the goal was total victory – to crush the Japanese military machine “in the shortest possible time.” U.S. forces had fought across the steppingstones of the Pacific and were currently “sweeping the Japanese from Okinawa” while American air forces had demolished Tokyo and dozens of other Japanese cities. Truman warned that “What has already happened to Tokyo will happen to every Japanese city whose industries feed the Japanese war machine. I urge Japanese civilians to leave those cities if they wish to save their lives.”

To decisively defeat Japan and force its unconditional surrender, Truman explained that the U.S. military would divide and destroy Japanese forces “piece by piece” through “overwhelming firepower” while aiming to win “with the smallest possible loss of life,” although the president

⁶ Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 401; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 180.

⁷ Harry S. Truman, “Special Message to the Congress on Winning the War With Japan,” June 1, 1945, APP; Harry S. Truman, Special Message to the Congress on Winning the War With Japan, June 1, 1945, Public Papers, HSTPL.

referred only to American lives. Japanese resistance was “hopeless” and “useless” but if they continued to resist “beyond the point of reason” the United States would destroy Japan’s entire range of modern industries and the country would “suffer the same destruction as Germany.” Although Truman reaffirmed that the United States had “no desire or intention to destroy or enslave the Japanese people” he nevertheless warned that those aims did not mean that the United States would not seek the destruction of Japan as a means to achieve its goals of successfully ending the war. Only surrender could save Japan from the kind of ruin that the world had witnessed in Germany.

But, as the United States prepared to invade the Japanese home islands, Truman warned Americans that the Japanese were desperate and fanatical and that future battles would result in “more damage” not less. The Japanese still had more than four million soldiers under arms – more than the U.S. had faced on the Western Front in Europe – and Truman pointed out that U.S. forces still had not faced the main strength of the Japanese army. After reviewing the mounting American casualties on Okinawa, the president cautioned the country that the war would get even tougher as the U.S. approached Japan. “All of our experience indicates that no matter how hard we hit the enemy from the air or from the sea, the foot soldier will still have to advance against strongly entrenched and fanatical troops, through sheer grit and fighting skill, backed up by all the mechanical superiority in flamethrowers, tanks and artillery we can put at his disposal. There is no easy way to win.”

To commit Americans for the final fight, the president reminded them that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, ordered the Bataan death march, and perpetrated the Manila massacre. And even though American victories had crushed Japan’s “dreams of conquest,” the Japanese still hoped to “win” the war through a negotiated peace. The president explained, “They are depending on America tiring of this war – becoming weary of the sacrifices it demands. They hope that our desire

to see our soldiers and sailors home again and the temptation to return to the comforts and profits of peace will force us to settle for some compromise short of unconditional surrender.” The president pledged, however, that the United States would not “relax... [or] weaken in its purpose.” The United States had “the men, the materiel, the skill, the leadership, the fortitude to achieve total victory” and were determined to “use every ounce of... energy and strength” to carry the fight on to the victorious end.⁸

AN ULTIMATUM TO JAPAN

Despite Truman’s triumphant and immutable rhetoric, U.S. strategists felt gravely perturbed about Japanese resistance and American war-weariness and began to rethink the possibility and morality of unconditional surrender. Officials at the White House and the Pentagon questioned whether unconditional surrender was worth the cost and tried to clarify for both Japanese and American audiences what the policy would mean. After Germany’s surrender, therefore, U.S. strategists drafted a surrender formula and an official proclamation that clarified American objectives and threatened Japan with total destruction if Tokyo did not accept American demands. By issuing an ultimatum, U.S. strategists hoped to convince Tokyo to surrender, fortify America’s will to win, justify unlimited war, and achieve total victory while saving time and lives.

U.S. strategists had considered issuing a formal explanation of unconditional surrender since the policy was first announced at Casablanca but, as the costs of the war mounted, they began to study the idea more seriously at the instigation of Great Britain. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Winston Churchill suggested that, after Germany’s defeat, the United States, Great Britain, China, and the Soviet Union could release a “four-power ultimatum” calling on Japan to surrender

⁸ Harry S. Truman, “Special Message to the Congress on Winning the War With Japan,” June 1, 1945, APP; Harry S. Truman, Special Message to the Congress on Winning the War With Japan, June 1, 1945, Public Papers, HSTPL.

unconditionally or be subjected to the overwhelming power of the Allies. The U.S. would have to decide what, if any, mitigation might be extended to Japan if Tokyo asked, but Churchill thought it might be worth mollifying the surrender demands if it saved a year or more of war and bloodshed. The Prime Minister promised to “abide by the judgment of the United States” and support whatever the U.S. decided, however, and pledged to see the war “through to the end.” Roosevelt agreed to issue an ultimatum, but he doubted whether it would have much effect on the Japanese who still refused to surrender and seemed to think they could obtain a negotiated peace. The President believed Japan “would be unlikely to wake up to the true state of affairs until all of their islands had felt the full weight of air attack.”⁹

U.S. strategists also worried that unconditional surrender was inadvertently prolonging and exacerbating the war that it meant to end, not because the Japanese found it intolerable but because they did not understand it. A paper from the Joint Intelligence Committee in April explained that unconditional surrender was still alien to the Japanese but, if the terms were clarified, Japan might surrender more quickly. The report stated:

The actual implications of unconditional surrender... are unknown to the Japanese. In this uncertainty, they are and will remain unprepared for either surrender or passive submission without formal unconditional surrender. If, however, the Japanese people, as well as their leaders, were persuaded both that absolute defeat was inevitable and that unconditional surrender did not imply national annihilation, surrender might follow fairly quickly. Otherwise, it is probable that resistance will continue until subdued by force.

The committee argued that Japan was still not likely to surrender unconditionally or otherwise, but it nevertheless encouraged the U.S. to clarify its intentions to persuade Tokyo to capitulate.¹⁰

⁹ *FRUS, Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945*, no. 418; Ray S. Cline, *Washington Command Post: The Operations Division* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1990 [1951]), 341.

¹⁰ *Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945*; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

After Germany's surrender, therefore, U.S. military planners began to develop a clearer definition of unconditional surrender and a declaration of purpose that would ultimately become the Potsdam Proclamation. U.S. strategists who formulated the surrender statement did not change U.S. policy and they did not intend to change the conditions for Japan's surrender, merely to make the terms more understandable and less ominous. A State Department paper explained on June 29, "Without abandoning our formula of 'unconditional surrender', it is believed that the Japanese people could be informed in more precise terms than have been employed in the past of the treatment which they can expect to receive upon unconditional surrender and of our intention to permit them to retain their political institutions, in so far as they are not inimicable [sic] to peaceful international relations."

The primary purpose of the proclamation, however, was to induce Japan's surrender. The State Department paper noted that a new formula could accomplish several objectives, but the main intent was to convince Japan to capitulate. It stated:

Such a statement of aims would tend (1) to dissipate the present Japanese fear of the unknown, (2) to combat the Japanese domestic propaganda to the effect that unconditional surrender means the extinction of the Japanese state and the enslavement of the people, (3) to create a conflict in Japan between the die-hard militarists and those who wish to end the war before all of Japan is destroyed, (4) to eliminate the most serious single obstacle to Japanese unconditional surrender, namely, concern over the fate of the throne, and (5) to satisfy a growing body of opinion in United States which is demanding that we endeavor to hasten the end of the war in the Pacific by stating definitely our war aims.¹¹

Through the proclamation, U.S. strategists also tried to achieve Japan's unconditional surrender by playing "good cop/bad cop" and demonstrating that the costs of surrender outweighed the costs of continued resistance. By clarifying unconditional surrender, the proclamation could take a softer approach and show Tokyo that the policy was not as harsh as the Japanese presumed. By

¹¹ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 589.

threatening total annihilation if Japan did not surrender, the proclamation could take a harder approach and show Tokyo that unconditional surrender was Japan's only hope.

A proclamation that convinced Tokyo to capitulate by clarifying unconditional surrender and threatening Japan would also save American lives. Undersecretary of State Joseph Grew, the former ambassador to Japan, drafted a statement calling on Japan to surrender unconditionally in June and talked it over with the president on June 18, before Truman met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to talk about invasion plans. Even though the president decided not to release the statement until the Allied leaders could discuss it at their next conference, Grew felt that the statement helped him "square" his conscience by making sure that every appropriate option was considered that might save thousands of American lives without sacrificing America's long-term objectives in neutralizing Japan's threats to peace in the future. Although Grew admitted that such a statement might fail, he "nevertheless felt very strongly that something might be gained and nothing could be lost by such a step."¹²

The Japanese were not the only intended recipients of the declaration, however. As the State paper enumerated, an American statement of purpose would also strengthen America's will to win. When the Army's Operations and Plans Division (OPD) approved a proposal to exploit the momentum from Germany's surrender to demand Japan's as well, military planners noted that the formula was also aimed at domestic audiences to check American war-weariness. The OPD reasoned that victory in Europe had left the United States vulnerable since the end of the war against Germany encouraged an immediate end to the war against Japan, not more costly battles, and the U.S. could be tempted to settle for a conditional peace. Indeed, the OPD warned that if Japan offered a peace compromise while the U.S. was redeploying its forces from Europe to the

¹² *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, 159.

Pacific, “It may be politically and psychologically difficult to refuse a Japanese offer” because of American war-weariness and the desire to bring the troops home.¹³ A declaration of intent would refocus and re-energize the country and strengthen Americans’ commitment to unconditional surrender and total victory in the Pacific. General Marshall likewise proposed an immediate demand for unconditional surrender on June 4, knowing that Americans were tired of the war’s length and costs. Marshall worried that Japan could sense America’s weariness and might offer a peace deal designed to prevent an invasion of the home islands and other measures meant to destroy Japan’s ability to start a future war. To withstand the temptation to accept peace without victory, Marshall wanted the U.S. to formally demand unconditional surrender now which would reinforce the importance of defeating and demilitarizing Japan and strengthen Americans’ resolve to continue the war to total victory.¹⁴

U.S. strategists also believed that an ultimatum would justify unconditional surrender and unlimited war. By warning the Japanese, the United States could vindicate invasion and the atomic bombs and provide moral cover for the casualties that the United States would exact and endure. In a meeting with Henry Stimson, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, and General Marshall in Stimson’s office on May 29, Undersecretary of State Joseph Grew discussed issuing an ultimatum which would warn Tokyo to surrender “or else have something worse happen to them.” Grew, of course, was referring to the atomic bomb although the device could not be mentioned in the meeting because some of the assistants present did not know about it.¹⁵ In a letter to Stimson on May 30, General Leslie Groves outlined a possible ultimatum to Tokyo and suggested that the

¹³ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

¹⁴ 5-152 Memorandum for Admiral Leahy, Admiral King, General Arnold from Brigadier General Andrew J. McFarland, June 4, 1945, GCMF.

¹⁵ 5-147 Memorandum of Conversation, May 29, 1945, GCMF.

declaration would cover and justify American actions. The ultimatum should make it clear, he said, that if Japan did not surrender “all subsequent slaughter is their guilt.” Groves recommended, “Choose a military target like a naval base if possible so that wholesale killing of civilians will be on the heads of the Japanese who refused to surrender at our ultimatum.”¹⁶ In essence, Groves argued that an ultimatum would absolve the United States of any moral crimes because it would place the responsibility and burden of destruction on Tokyo, not Washington.

WHEN WILL JAPAN SURRENDER?

In June, U.S. strategists continued to ask what it would take to force Japan to cease resistance and surrender to the Allies. In the War Department, Stimson commissioned two studies by the OPD on unconditional surrender and whether the United States should clarify or modify its terms. The first study concluded on June 4 that “The point in our military progress at which the Japanese will accept defeat and agree to our terms is unpredictable... Like the Germans, their protracted resistance is based upon the hope of achieving a conditional surrender. Presumably, only the conviction that their position is completely hopeless will persuade them to give up their holdings in Asia.” The OPD ventured that it would probably require the combination of Soviet entry into the war and an American invasion or imminent threat of invasion “to convince them of the hopelessness of their position.” The second study determined on June 15 that “a public declaration of war aims” to define unconditional surrender had “definite merit.”¹⁷

Meanwhile, as the JCS finalized its plans for invasion, OPD planners and theater specialists received expert opinions from all quarters about when Japan might be expected to give up its

¹⁶ Leslie R. Groves to Henry L. Stimson, May 30, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

¹⁷ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL; Cline, *Washington Command Post*, 344.

resistance. A British expert named Mr. Dening indicated that the earliest date Japan might surrender was the end of 1945. He told the OPD that even though Japanese naval and air forces, and industries had been devastated, “the government is under the thumb of the Army. It won’t give up until the Army sees its defeat inevitable.” Dening did not expect the army to accept defeat before autumn and, even then, he expected Army leaders to try to save the core of Japanese military tradition.¹⁸

Japanese officials, however, repeatedly rejected unconditional surrender and never gave Washington any evidence that they would submit to the will of the United States. One spokesman, Dr. Kosaku Tamura, an authority on international relations, declared in June that Japan would never give in to Allied demands for unconditional surrender and that the “Japanese-American war can only be terminated through the ghastly landing operation of the American forces on the homeland of Japan.” Paraphrasing Patrick Henry’s famous speech, the spokesman announced, “I do not know what course the people of Germany may take, but, as for us, the Japanese people, there is no choice but to take death.”¹⁹ On Tokyo radio the following month, Admiral Kichisaburo Nomura announced that as long as the United States insisted on unconditional surrender, it would have to pay the price of each battle in blood. Japanese strategy aimed “to take the heaviest toll of the enemy so as to make the enemy realize his folly.”²⁰

The Combined Intelligence Committee reported on July 8 that Japanese leaders were becoming increasingly desperate but still felt unconditional surrender was intolerable. The committee therefore expected that “Japan will use all political means for avoiding complete defeat or unconditional surrender.” Tokyo would try to convince the U.S. that the conquest of Japan would

¹⁸ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

¹⁹ “Japanese ‘Replies’ On Air To Truman,” *NYT*, June 19, 1945.

²⁰ “Nomura Attacks Our Peace Terms,” *NYT*, July 9, 1945.

be too long and costly, attempt to persuade the USSR to stay neutral, and would submit peace feelers “to bring the war to an acceptable end, to weaken the determination of the United Nations to fight to the bitter end, or to create inter-Allied dissension.” At this point, however, the committee determined that “Japanese leaders are now playing for time in the hope that Allied war weariness, Allied disunity, or some ‘miracle,’ will present an opportunity to arrange a compromise peace.”²¹

The Intelligence Committee also observed that a large portion of the Japanese people now accepted the likelihood of complete military defeat since they could not ignore the physical devastation of their country wrought by American blockade and bombardment. The committee concluded, however, that Soviet entry into the war would decisively convince the Japanese of the hopelessness of resistance and the inevitability of defeat. Even though individual Japanese soldiers or citizens might continue to resist and sacrifice themselves, the committee believed that the population as a whole would prefer national survival through surrender to national suicide. However, according to the committee, the Japanese believed that unconditional surrender meant national extinction, not survival. Japanese leaders had not given the Allies any indication that they were willing to accept such terms and they found unconditional surrender revolting because it implied foreign occupation, foreign custody of the emperor, and the loss of national prestige. Indeed, to avoid the loss and shame of unconditional surrender, the committee thought that Japanese leaders might be willing to forfeit all of the territory they had conquered in Asia and the Pacific, recognize Korea’s independence, and disarm their military forces. The committee concluded though, that “The basic policy of the present government is to fight as long and as desperately as

²¹ CCS 643/3, July 8, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow; *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, unnumbered document following no. 710, #3.

possible in hope of avoiding complete defeat and of acquiring a better bargaining position in a negotiated peace.”²²

Washington did receive positive indications that the Japanese wanted to quit the war but “under what conditions no one could positively say” since the signs of Japan’s willingness to negotiate or surrender were canceled out by the signals suggesting Japan would fight to the death and never surrender. The conflicting views were summed up in an “Estimate of the Enemy Situation” which the War Department’s Military Intelligence Division prepared at the OPD’s request. The estimate emphasized the chances of Japan’s surrender without an invasion depended on the terms offered by the Allies. The estimate stated that “The Japanese believe... that unconditional surrender would be the equivalent of national extinction, and there are as yet no indications that they are ready to accept such terms... The surrender of the Japanese government might occur at any time from now until the end of the complete destruction of all Japanese power of resistance, depending upon the conditions of surrender which the Allies might accept.”²³

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER WITHOUT UNLIMITED WAR

To enumerate the conditions of an acceptable surrender, Stimson and Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy expanded on previous formulations of unconditional surrender as part of a broader ultimatum for Japan at the end of June. Stimson and McCloy hoped that a clearer definition would “hasten Japanese surrender or at least increase the psychological strain under which the Japanese continued to resist.” Meanwhile, representatives from State, Navy, the Army Air Force, army intelligence, the War Department’s Civil Affairs Division, the OPD, and General George A.

²² CCS 643/3, July 8, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow; *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, unnumbered document following no. 710, #3.

²³ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL; Cline, *Washington Command Post*, 346-347.

Lincoln, the Army's chief planner, all worked to develop the precise contents of the ultimatum that would become the Potsdam Proclamation.²⁴

President Truman also appointed Stimson (War), Grew (State) and James Forrestal (Navy) to review the War Department's surrender doctrine and draft a statement to convince Japan to surrender short of a final climactic battle. On June 26, the "Committee of Three" planned to offer Japan a chance to surrender unconditionally before an invasion or atomic attack but did not invite the Japanese to open peace negotiations. The committee also agreed that clarifying surrender might not lead to Japan's capitulation but there was no harm in trying. In fact, they reasoned that even if Tokyo utterly rejected the declaration, Japan's refusal could solidify and reinvigorate the American will to achieve absolute victory since the rejection would make it clear that the U.S. would have to expend its "fullest efforts" to win.²⁵

In addition to the terms of surrender, strategists and staff members debated about how to warn Japan, whether the United States should issue an ultimatum unilaterally or jointly with other Allies, and whether Japan should be allowed to maintain its imperial dynasty. McCloy also highlighted the need to occupy Japan. He told Stimson on June 29, "We have felt that without occupation there would not be the symbol of defeat that is necessary to impress both the Japanese and the Far Eastern peoples nor the means to demilitarize the islands."²⁶ Stimson, on the other hand, worried about the administrative responsibility of governing Japan and hoped that the U.S. would not have to oversee Japanese affairs as it did Germany's. "I am afraid we would make a hash of it if we tried," he told Truman on July 16. The occupation should be limited to inculcating Japan's

²⁴ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL; Cline, *Washington Command Post*, 345.

²⁵ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 591; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 180; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 67.

²⁶ John J. McCloy to Henry L. Stimson, June 29, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

defeat on the Japanese and Asians, demilitarizing the country, and punishing war criminals “including those responsible for the perfidy at Pearl Harbor.”²⁷

By the first week of July, the proclamation draft was ready. In thirteen points, it offered Japan the chance to surrender and warned that the Allies were prepared to attack. The recent destruction of Germany showed what the Allies could do, and the Japanese people could choose to resist or surrender. If Japan conceded defeat, the Allies expected to eliminate Japanese militarism and occupy the home islands where Japan’s sovereignty would be restricted. Japanese forces would be disarmed but the Allies did not intend to destroy or enslave the Japanese people although they would punish war criminals and establish democratic freedoms. Japan would be allowed to retain peaceful industries and perhaps a constitutional monarchy, however, and the Allies would withdraw once their objectives had been accomplished. The proclamation offered a stern ultimatum though, Japan could surrender unconditionally or be destroyed.²⁸

Once the secretaries were satisfied with the draft, Stimson sent the proclamation with a memo to Truman on July 2 which, the secretary felt, represented the thinking of the U.S. government as a whole. Due to fears of horrendous casualties, the ultimatum was meant to convince Japan to surrender without an invasion, if possible. The OPD had explained, “The proclamation is intended to induce the surrender of Japan and thus avoid the heavy casualties which would result from a fight to the finish.”²⁹ Desperate to find another way to victory and to achieve surrender while avoiding invasion, Stimson presented the proclamation draft as a way to force Japan’s unconditional surrender without unlimited war. The proclamation still demanded the equivalent of unconditional surrender but omitted any mention of it while suggesting that Japan might retain its emperor. At the

²⁷ Henry L. Stimson to James F. Byrnes, July 16, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

²⁸ *FRUS: The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. 1, no. 594.

²⁹ *Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945*; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

same time, the proclamation warned Japan of total annihilation and threatened the use of the atomic bomb if Japan did not capitulate. By offering a softer carrot while wielding a sharper stick, the proclamation still proposed to achieve the victory necessary to demilitarize and democratize Japan, but at a far more tolerable cost to the United States.³⁰

Stimson was particularly disturbed by the costs of invasion projected by the JCS and the costs of occupation described by Joseph Grew. In his memo, Stimson reminded Truman that the occupation of Japan after the invasion could be “very long, costly and arduous” for the United States. The islands’ topography, which Stimson had visited, made Japan an advantageous location for “a last ditch defense” like those on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, although conquering Japan would likely prove even more demanding since the home islands were so much larger. By landing U.S. soldiers on Japanese soil, the U.S. would be casting the die because, once the invasion had begun, the United States would have no choice but to see the operation through and Stimson expected the fight to the finish would be even more bitter than the one in Germany. He warned that if the United States continued its policy of annihilation, “the attempt to exterminate [Japan’s] armies and her population by gunfire or other means will tend to produce a fusion of race solidity and antipathy which had no analogy in the case of Germany.” The Truman administration would have to accept whatever losses the invasion and occupation incurred, and the U.S. would have to destroy Japan even more completely than Germany because of Japan’s terrain and national character. The Secretary of War recognized that the Japanese people were “highly patriotic” and would likely heed any calls for fanatical resistance to repel an invasion of their homeland.”³¹

³⁰ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 619–20; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 67.

³¹ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL; *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 592; see also Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 619–624.

Because Japanese resistance was likely to make the costs of invasion and occupation excruciating for the United States, Stimson asked if there was any way to pass the bitter cup. Was there any alternative to invasion and occupation that would still ensure “the equivalent” of Japan’s unconditional surrender and the “permanent destruction” of Japan’s ability to threaten the “peace of the Pacific” while avoiding the mass casualties of war in Japan? Stimson’s memo demonstrated that total victory remained the supreme objective for the United States and the American Ares still planned to win the war decisively. He was not looking for a way out of the war’s moral dilemma. Stimson did not call for the United States to forfeit total victory and abandon unconditional surrender in favor of peace with honor. After all, the purpose of unconditional surrender was to force Japan’s submission so it could be demilitarized and democratized. Peace, without victory, would never last very long. But while Stimson remained determined to see the war to the end and to win it, he nevertheless hoped for a less bloody path to victory.³²

Stimson offered the diplomatic declaration as a solution to the war. Through the ultimatum to Tokyo, the Secretary of War proposed unconditional surrender without unlimited war. U.S. strategists had always supposed that total victory required total war, but Stimson thought the U.S. might be able to convince Japan to surrender given the current circumstances. “I am inclined to think that there is enough such chance to make it well worthwhile our giving them a warning of what is to come and a definite opportunity to capitulate,” he told Truman. By cajoling and threatening Tokyo, Stimson thought the U.S. could end the war successfully on American terms.³³

Stimson thought giving Tokyo a last chance might convince the Japanese high command to surrender because Japan had no allies, its navy had been destroyed which left the islands vulnerable

³² *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 592; see also Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 619-624.

³³ *Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945*; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

to blockades that could cut off food and supplies, Japanese cities were defenseless against air attacks, while the United States had inexhaustible resources and support from Great Britain, China, and the Soviet Union. He also believed that the U.S. occupied the moral high ground as the victim of Japanese “sneak attack.” Moreover, Stimson felt that Japanese leaders were more susceptible to reason than the American press described. Japan, he told Truman, was not a nation of “mad fanatics” – their mentality was not that different from Americans’, and Japanese intelligence, technological advancement, and modernization during the last seventy years made Japan a force to be reckoned with, but also a side that could be parleyed with. Stimson argued that the Japanese had the intelligence “to recognize the folly of a fight to the finish” and to accept a proffered peace amounting to unconditional surrender.³⁴

Stimson’s memo thus proposed the *equivalent* of unconditional surrender. He recognized that the Japanese had moral objections to the policy and so he tried to placate them by insisting on effective, though not nominal, unconditional surrender. Clearly, the Japanese had a moral and emotional recoil to unconditional surrender because they regarded any kind of surrender as disgraceful. As a result, Japanese officials had fixated on unconditional surrender – almost like a psychological block that was preventing them from capitulating, even when continued resistance was futile and devastating. Japan also opposed unconditional surrender because the policy suggested that Emperor Hirohito would be deposed, possibly tried as a war criminal, and potentially executed. For the Japanese, the status of the imperial institution was non-negotiable which made unconditional surrender a non-starter. So, to convince Japan to surrender, Stimson altered the diplomatic terms by omitting the phrase “unconditional surrender” and by suggesting that Japan could keep the emperor.

³⁴ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 592; see also Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 619-624.

Stimson's thinking was strongly influenced by his correspondence and discussions with Joseph Grew who likewise wanted to guarantee the emperor's position to save American lives, as long as it did not compromise unconditional surrender. In a meeting with Truman on May 28, Undersecretary of State Grew argued that the U.S. should not sacrifice anything to achieve its ultimate objective which was to make it impossible for Japan to threaten world peace ever again. That would require not only the destruction of Japan's "tools for war" and Japan's military capabilities, but the abolition of Japanese militarism. At the same time, Grew wanted to accomplish those goals "with the least possible loss of American lives" and he was willing to consider any course that might immediately lead Japan to surrender without sacrificing the United States' overall objective or principle. Despite his sympathy for the Japanese, Grew insisted that they were "a fanatical people" and were likely to fight to the last man which would make the cost in American lives "unpredictable." According to Grew, the most important obstacle preventing Japan from surrendering was their belief that unconditional surrender would entail the destruction or removal of the emperor and the imperial throne. But if the Truman administration could provide assurances that the Japanese would be able to determine their own political structure after being defeated and demilitarized, that would allow the Japanese to save face and Grew thought they would surrender quickly. He reasoned that as soon as the U.S. turned its back on Japan, the Japanese would reenthroned the emperor anyway and the best that the U.S. could hope for in Japan was a constitutional monarchy since experience proved that "democracy in Japan would never work."³⁵ Grew and Stimson, therefore, encouraged Truman to allow explicitly approve the emperor's continuity.

³⁵ *FRUS, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, vol. VI, no. 379.

The important point, after all, was for Japan to submit to the Allies so they could remake Japan. As long as Japan's surrender accomplished that reality, everything else was auxiliary – it did not matter what anyone called it or how they reached it. The OPD had pointed out earlier in the spring that Japan's surrender was sufficiently attractive and possible to justify the concessions that might incentivize surrender – “so long as our realistic aims for peace in the Pacific are not adversely affected.”³⁶ Thus, U.S. strategists were willing to consider concessions as long as they did not sacrifice its ultimate objectives in the Pacific. If Japan would still submit at discretion to the Allies and allow them to remake Japanese government and society, that was all that mattered. The proclamation draft thus encouraged Japan to surrender unconditionally without using those words. U.S. policy had not changed and their ultimate objective in the war remained the same, Stimson simply left out the words that he thought were causing the hang-up.³⁷ Stimson also implied that the U.S. would permit Japan to retain its emperor and the imperial establishment.

If Japan could not or would not recognize the folly of continued fighting and still rejected U.S. overtures, the declaration would also threaten Japan with overwhelming force if Tokyo did not surrender. Stimson wanted the proclamation to describe the inevitability and totality of Japan's destruction, highlight the determination of the Allies to permanently destroy the authority and influence of those who sought world conquest, and express the determination to limit Japanese sovereignty. At the same time, the ultimatum would disavow “any attempt to extirpate the Japanese as a race or to destroy them as a nation” and permit the Japanese to restore their economy.³⁸ But, to make the ultimatum more threatening, Stimson proposed to use the atomic bomb as he later put it,

³⁶ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL; Cline, *Washington Command Post*, 345.

³⁷ 5-147 Memorandum of Conversation, May 29, 1945, GCMF.

³⁸ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 592; see also Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 619-624.

“in the manner best calculated to persuade that Emperor and his counselors about him to submit to our demand for what was essentially unconditional surrender, placing his immense power over his people and his troops subject to our orders.”³⁹

Stimson’s memo thus enhanced the earlier proclamation drafts by enlarging its carrot and stick. By offering to guarantee the emperor’s position, Stimson hoped to make unconditional surrender more tolerable and, by threatening to use the atomic bomb, Stimson hoped to make continued resistance unbearable. Together, the emperor carrot and atomic stick would convince Japan to capitulate. The secretary explained in his memoirs,

In order to end the war in the shortest possible time and to avoid the enormous losses of human life which otherwise confronted us, I felt that we must use the Emperor as our instrument to command and compel his people to cease fighting and subject themselves to our authority through him, and that to accomplish this we must give him and his controlling advisers a compelling reason to accede to our demands. This reason furthermore must be of such a nature that his people could understand his decision. The bomb seemed to me to furnish a unique instrument for that purpose.⁴⁰

The proclamation draft made no mention of the atomic bomb, however, since most of the strategists working on the ultimatum had no knowledge of the Manhattan Project and Stimson even told the Truman that the proclamation was “written without specific relation to the employment of any new weapon.” Stimson and McCloy evidently had the bomb in mind, though.⁴¹

Two weeks later, on July 16, Stimson wrote to Truman and reiterated the importance of softening the U.S. carrot and sharpening its stick. He told the president that “The Japanese soldier has proved himself capable of a suicidal, last ditch defense; and will no doubt continue to display such a defense on his homeland.” To avoid fighting the Japanese with their backs to the wall, Stimson wanted the U.S. to call upon any advantages to end the war quickly and successfully. He

³⁹ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 631.

⁴⁰ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 631.

⁴¹ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

again emphasized warning Japan in order to induce their surrender “as quickly as possible” but, in the meantime, the Secretary of War felt the U.S. should move forward with its other tactical plans including the atomic bomb. He explained, “if the Japanese persist, the full force of our newer weapons should be brought to bear in the course of which a renewed and even heavier warning, backed by the power of the new forces and possibly the actual entrance of the Russians in the war, should be delivered.”⁴²

In sum, by demanding Japan’s complete capitulation, while offering the equivalent of unconditional surrender and threatening Japan with total annihilation, Stimson’s memo and declaration draft aimed to achieve decisive victory while saving time and lives. Total victory remained the most important consideration but concerns about American casualties impelled Stimson to try alternative approaches that might save lives without sacrificing the total victory necessary to remake Japan. The secretary hoped that the proclamation would provide the United States with a shortcut or another silver bullet that would enable the U.S. to win a maximum victory at minimum costs.

Peace Through Victory

The secretary reviewed his proposal with the President who gave what Stimson thought of as “general approval” and Truman then discussed Stimson’s suggestions at the Potsdam Conference which resulted in the Potsdam Proclamation.⁴³ But despite Stimson’s recommendations, debates about unconditional surrender and the role of the emperor persisted within the State Department. Assistant Secretary of State Archibald MacLeish wrote to his boss, the new Secretary of State, James F. Byrnes, on July 6, and explained that the preservation of the emperor and his throne constituted

⁴² FRUS, *The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference)*, 1945, vol. II, no. 1236.

⁴³ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 619–20.

“irreducible Japanese terms.” State officials had determined that the Japanese would willingly suffer severe hardships to meet those terms; or that the Japanese were prepared for desperate resistance to ensure the survival of the emperor. If the Truman administration did decide to formally modify unconditional surrender, MacLeish thought both the Japanese and the American people had a right to know what the U.S. surrender policy was. But he opposed mitigating the surrender terms because he thought it would undermine American objectives and betray American deaths.⁴⁴

MacLeish worried that Americans would oppose a public statement guaranteeing the status and role of the emperor because the policy would be inconsistent with the surrender terms for Germany. More important than a negative public reaction, MacLeish pointed out that “Surrender on terms, even irreducible terms, is not unconditional surrender.” This criticism involved more than integrity to the abstract principle of surrender, however. By allowing Hirohito to remain on the throne, the U.S. ran the risk that the imperial institution would lead Japan once more down the path of militarism, aggression, and conquest. MacLeish acknowledged the argument that only the emperor could surrender but he maintained that immediate concerns about ending and winning the war had to be balanced against the long-term considerations of winning the peace. He explained, “however useful the emperor may be to us now, he may be a source of the greatest danger a generation from now.” MacLeish applied the same juxtaposition to the issue of American lives. He acknowledged that retaining the emperor could directly save American (and Japanese) lives, but “The lives already spent will have been sacrificed in vain, and lives will be lost again in the future in a new war, if the throne is employed in the future as it has been employed in the past.” MacLeish reminded Byrnes that Roosevelt had announced unconditional surrender in the first place, not merely as a way to force Japan’s military defeat, but to enable the conversion of Japan from a

⁴⁴ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 593.

militaristic regime into a peaceful, law-abiding nation. If the United States conciliated Japan and its emperor, the U.S. would compromise its ultimate goals and MacLeish was unwilling to sacrifice the peace of future generations for an immediate armistice, and he recommended that the Truman administration should maintain its idealistic faith in the original intent of the Casablanca Doctrine. At the very least, MacLeish opposed issuing a public statement until the State Department could determine its policy and make it so clear and precise that Americans or Japanese could not possibly misinterpret it.⁴⁵

The State Department debated the proclamation draft further the following day and Grew insisted that the draft had not modified the policy of unconditional surrender. Taking a more moderate approach, Grew also defended the offer to keep the emperor while MacLeish and Dean Acheson criticized it. Grew maintained that the Japanese military, not the emperor, was responsible for the war and that abolishing the imperial institution would be impossible anyway. MacLeish contended though, that the military had used the emperor to control the Japanese people and Acheson questioned why the military insisted on retaining him if the emperor was not important to Japanese war-making.⁴⁶

As advisors privately wrangled over the emperor's status and the meaning and implications of unconditional surrender, the Truman administration unflinchingly stayed the course publicly. As backdoor overtures began to make their way from Tokyo to Washington, U.S. officials responded as General Grant had to General Lee at Appomattox, eighty years earlier. When a Japanese official contacted the OSS in Portugal to determine what the United States planned in the Far East and how far they intended to go, he affirmed that there could be no unconditional surrender, though he acknowledged that Japan would be "hopelessly smashed" by American bombers. Japanese leaders

⁴⁵ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 593.

⁴⁶ Minutes, Secretary's Staff Committee, July 7, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

were counting, however, on the disintegration of the Grand Alliance. Instead of fighting a long war against Japan in China and then losing the Far East markets to the Soviets, Inouye recommended that the U.S. come to some sort of arrangement. In effect, the Japanese contacts announced that Japan was ready to cease hostilities, but they wanted to retain possession of the home islands and refused unconditional surrender. They emphasized the “common interests” between Japan and the United States against the USSR and felt that if the U.S. continued to insist on unconditional surrender that the war would continue into China. Joseph Grew responded in June that U.S. representatives would only discuss peace if it involved Japan’s unconditional surrender because that was “the only basis acceptable to the United States.”⁴⁷ In July, Allen Dulles received similar Japanese peace feelers through OSS representatives in Switzerland, but he explained that quick, unconditional surrender was the only way for Japan to salvage something from the war.⁴⁸

Amid the deliberations over surrender and the emperor, the American public spouted speculations that Japan had tendered “a bona fide peace offer.” With the administration’s approval, Joseph Grew told the press on July 10 that Japan had not offered to surrender and that no terms except unconditional surrender would be accepted. The peace rumors disquieted him though, and he wrote to James Byrnes three days later about his concerns that American morale was weak and that the American people were “getting ready for a compromise peace.” In other words, Japanese hopes seemed to be coming true. All the Japanese had to do was reject Allied surrender terms, continue to resist, and project defiance to the end and the American people would eventually tire of the war’s length and costs and sue for settlement short of total victory.⁴⁹ Within the administration, calls to soften surrender increased. As Grew explained to Byrnes on July 16, those who wanted to modify

⁴⁷ *FRUS, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, vol. VI, nos. 346, 356.

⁴⁸ *FRUS, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, vol. VI, no. 361.

⁴⁹ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 597.

the surrender terms believed that preserving the emperor and his throne would shorten the war and save Allied lives since the emperor could convince the Japanese people and armies to lay down their arms. Saving one emperor to save thousands of American lives seemed like a great deal and Grew worried that such a compromise was becoming harder to resist on diplomatic or moral grounds.⁵⁰

As the Japanese continued to resist and defy American overtures, the Truman administration became more convinced that unconditional surrender would be impossible without unlimited war. The Joint Intelligence Committee reported, for example, that, in order to compel Japan's surrender, the Allies would have to force Japanese army leaders to acknowledge defeat. Either the Allies would have to defeat Japan's remaining armies in the inner zone or Japan's army leaders would have to be able to salvage something to maintain their military tradition. But for the Japanese Army to accept unconditional surrender, the Allies would have to prove that the terms would not discredit Japan's warrior traditions and that surrender would permit Japan's military to rise again – the very thing that unconditional surrender was established to prevent.⁵¹

On July 11, the *New York Times* wrote that American inflexibility would disabuse the Japanese of any hopes of a negotiated peace and foreclose any expressions by American citizens or allies that would encourage such hopes since those would only prolong the war. The best answer to Japanese peace feelers, the paper wrote, was bombs. After all, Japanese threats about more Iwos and Okinawas would sound “hollow... to a Japanese hearing the whine of carrier fighter planes in his own sky.” Soon, the *Times* warned, the Japanese would witness the consequences of Pearl Harbor in

⁵⁰ FRUS, *The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference)*, 1945, vol. II, no. 1237.

⁵¹ FRUS, *The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference)*, 1945, vol. II, unnumbered document following no. 710, #3.

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their own cities. “The only possible answer to the Japanese,” the paper asserted was unconditional surrender and unlimited war.⁵²

⁵² “Unconditional Surrender,” *NYT*, July 11, 1945.

Planning to Defeat Japan

Japanese resistance not only challenged the U.S. commitment to unconditional surrender but to unlimited war as well. Because the Japanese refused to surrender on any terms, U.S. strategists began to rethink American goals and strategies based on what was possible and moral as they tried to break and defeat Japan at an acceptable cost. Within the U.S. government, four factions coalesced in spring 1945 and championed four different strategies to defeat Japan and win the war.

The Invasion Faction believed that total victory was the best way to win the war and win the peace but also that Japan would continue to resist and so the only way to defeat the Japanese and compel their unconditional surrender was to invade the home islands with ground troops. The military's invasion plan, Operation Downfall, included two phases in which U.S. forces would first invade Kyushu in November 1945 and then Honshu in March 1946, and U.S. strategists planned to fight until Japan was totally defeated and surrendered unconditionally. Strategists in the Bomb and Blockade Faction likewise believed in the importance of total victory, but they contended that the U.S. could overcome Japanese resistance and coerce their unconditional surrender through naval and air power alone. Army Air Force commanders, in particular, claimed that their strategic bombing campaign could continue to wipe out Japanese cities until Tokyo capitulated. The Psychological Warfare Faction believed that Japan was tired of the war and that the U.S. could convince Tokyo to surrender through a psychological campaign. By presenting a consistent rhetorical message in public speeches and radio broadcasts that clarified unconditional surrender, U.S. officials could assuage Japanese fears about the policy and persuade them to accept their inevitable defeat without the force of arms. The Conditional Surrender Faction believed that saving American lives was more important than total victory and maintained that the costs of overcoming Japanese resistance to achieve unconditional surrender were too high. Strategists wanted to

conciliate Japan and modify the surrender policy to end the war quickly and at minimal cost. By negotiating a conditional surrender, the United States could make peace, save time and lives, and balance against the Soviet Union in Asia.

These four strategies to compel, coerce, convince, or conciliate Japan manifested four different illustrations of how far the United States was willing to go to win the war based on what U.S. strategists considered possible and moral. The first key difference between the strategies, after all, was the decisive blow each group thought was necessary to overcome Japanese resistance and end the war. The invasion strategy, in other words, was not merely a program for amphibious assaults against the home islands, it was a proposal to use every possible means to destroy Japan's capacity and will to make war, culminating in an invasion of the home islands. Invasion strategists still intended to bomb and blockade Japan and issue a warning or ultimatum to persuade Tokyo to surrender – those who knew about the Manhattan Project were even willing to deploy the unproven atomic bomb – but they believed that, ultimately, an invasion would be required to achieve total victory and compel Japan's unconditional surrender. In contrast, strategists who proposed a conditional surrender did not believe that total victory was possible or at least that it was impossible at an acceptable cost, and they therefore argued that the United States should negotiate a peace settlement short of total victory in order to achieve peace with honor.

Hence, the second key difference between the four strategies was the human costs that each group was willing to exact and endure in order to achieve American objectives and these nuances provoked different moral criticisms. Because the invasion strategy proposed to achieve victory at all costs, critics condemned the plans for total victory through total, unlimited war. They denounced the invasion plans because of the possible number of American casualties, they reprehended the atomic bomb as an immoral weapon and firebombing as an atrocious practice, and decried the

overall objective of unconditional surrender for the time and lives it would cost. Opposing critics condemned conditional surrender for betraying the soldiers who had fought and died for victory, claimed that a peace settlement would not preclude another world war, and worried that peace without victory would cost more lives in the long run than unconditional surrender in 1945-1946.

In the end, though, the Truman administration continued its course for total victory. The President approved the plans for invasion, authorized the use of the atomic bomb, and issued an ultimatum warning Japan that the United States was willing to exact and endure the costs of an unlimited war in order to force Japan's unconditional surrender. In short, the deliberations over the plans to defeat Japan showed that the United States was willing to do whatever it took to win. Total victory, even in the face of unflagging Japanese resistance and growing domestic weariness, proved to be the most important strategic and moral consideration for U.S. strategists. Although they undoubtedly wanted to save time and lives, they believed winning World War II decisively was more valuable, and more ethical, than winning quickly and cheaply. Clearly, in the summer of 1945, despite their qualms, U.S. strategists accepted victory at all costs. There was no single assessment or consensus about how many American or Japanese lives might be required to achieve total victory – casualty estimates varied extremely – but with the plans for invasion and the dropping of the atomic bombs, the valuation of victory and the will to win reached their zenith. Indeed, U.S. strategists were more tolerant of the human costs of war – more willing to exact and endure American and enemy lives – in August 1945 than at any other time in American history. By that time, World War II had truly become a war without cost.

THE FOUR FACTIONS

By the time Truman assumed the presidency in April 1945, American victory was assured. U.S. forces had destroyed the Japanese navy in the Battle of Leyte Gulf the previous fall and Japan

had virtually no air force to speak of aside from some die-hard Kamikazes. The United States had seized every major strategic island, port, or base in the Pacific, and had taken up positions from which to invade Japan. Meanwhile, LeMay's bombers had obliterated Tokyo and were well on their way to wiping out every major Japanese city and the American blockade by aircraft carriers and aircraft, submarines, and mines cut off the Japanese islands from food and natural resources necessary to sustain the war effort and the nation's survival. Japan's defeat was already assured and now the islands were being strangled to death.

In May, after the Allies achieved victory in Europe and Germany surrendered unconditionally, the Truman administration fixed its focus on forcing Japan's unconditional surrender. American forces in Europe could now be transferred to the Pacific for a final knock-out blow against Japan. By every military metric, Japan had been defeated. The historian Russell Weigley explained,

By all indices of national power customarily consulted in the industrial age, the American Navy and Air Force planners should have been right in their growing conviction that no invasion of the Japanese home islands would be necessary, that... maritime strangulation and aerial obliteration of the cities doubly assured Japan's defeat. But the Japanese defenders of Peleliu, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa had amply demonstrated that to them, indices normally consulted in the West and normal limits upon the capacity to resist did not apply.¹

Or as J. Samuel Walker has pointed out, the fact that "Japan was on the verge of defeat did not mean, however, that it was on the verge of surrender." The United States still had not engaged the main body of Japanese soldiers who had devastated China for the better part of a decade, no American soldier had set foot on Japanese home soil, and Tokyo still refused to surrender on any terms. The Japanese high command knew their forces would never turn back the Allied tide but they remained defiant nonetheless. After the summer of 1944, Japan no longer fought for victory, but for peace with honor, and determined to exact so many American casualties that the United States

¹ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 310.

would lose the will to fight for unconditional surrender and would negotiate a peace settlement.²

Thus, even as Japan grew more desperate, the Joint Chiefs “saw no prospect of surrender until the army leaders acknowledged defeat” and Japanese militarists threatened to assassinate anyone willing to capitulate.³ In spite of all their losses, casualties, and destruction, the Japanese continued to resist and refused to surrender.

What would it take to break Japan? American strategists wondered. How could the United States compel its enemy to lay down its arms and quit fighting when the enemy absolutely refused to surrender? The destruction of Japanese cities and industries certainly suggested that the Japanese could not take much more war, but resistance across the Pacific – and especially on Iwo Jima and Okinawa – indicated that the Japanese would fight to the death. As the war dragged on through the spring and summer of 1945, therefore, U.S. strategists began to focus more exclusively on destroying Japan’s will to fight by increasing the costs of resistance and the benefits of surrender to induce Tokyo to capitulate.

Although America’s final victory was undeniable, the timing and costs of victory were still up in the air. There was no consensus among military leaders, administration officials, or public opinion about how best to end the war on America’s terms and, as U.S. forces approached the final confrontation in the home islands, American leaders worried more and more about national complacency and stamina.⁴ Never were the tensions tighter between victory, its timing and its costs than in the summer of 1945 and U.S. strategists struggled once more to totally win the war at the earliest possible date with the least loss of American lives. As the Truman administration planned for the end of the war, therefore, four factions developed and tried to direct U.S. policy and strategy.

² Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 28–29.

³ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 179.

⁴ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 179; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 23, 32.

The Invasion Faction consisted mostly of military officers who believed that Japan would never surrender, and they accepted whatever human costs were necessary to win the war. Since Japan could not be persuaded or coerced to surrender, there was nothing the U.S. could do to manipulate the costs and benefits of the war to make Japan stop fighting so the United States had no choice but to physically compel Japan's defeat by overwhelming brute force. Defeating Japan would require American soldiers to invade and occupy the country which would take months or years and could result in hundreds of thousands of casualties but, army officials in particular argued that an invasion was the only way to make America's victory decisive and enable the transformation of Japan into a peaceful, law-abiding member of the international community. For U.S. military strategists, winning the war and peace decisively were the most important objectives of the war and they believed that the United States should be willing to sacrifice whatever time and lives were necessary to win.

Members of the Bomb and Blockade Faction believed that Japan was amenable to changes in the costs and benefits of continued fighting and hoped to coerce Japan's surrender through continued blockades and bombing. If U.S. forces could make the war bloody and destructive enough, Japanese leaders would recognize that the price of eternal resistance was too high and sue for peace – even one as unpleasant as unconditional surrender. U.S. strategists, especially Navy and Army Air Force leaders, continued to insist that bombers and battleships could win the war on their own and that the U.S. could pressure Japan to surrender from the air and sea without having to conquer Japan on land. General Arnold also wanted to prove that his air forces were the equal of the Army and the Navy to secure his own independent branch of the military. These strategists hoped that air and naval power could destroy Japan's capacity for war, bring about Japan's surrender, and win the war just as decisively as a land invasion without sacrificing time and lives. While the first faction prioritized victory over all other objectives and believed that the U.S. could not achieve a

decisive *and* quick *and* cheap victory, the second faction presumed that that the U.S. could accomplish everything it sought. Both groups assumed though that Japanese resistance would never falter and, by softening its position, the U.S. would provoke a domestic backlash and, worse, demonstrate to the Japanese high command that Americans were losing their patience and stomach for the war which would encourage hardliners to hold out for a better peace settlement. The United States, therefore, had to be just as unflinching in its demands and plans as the Japanese were in their resistance.

The Psychological Warfare Faction claimed that the costs of further fighting were unacceptable to both sides and they maintained that Japan could simply be convinced to surrender through a campaign of psychological warfare. Because they believed that winning the war as soon as possible and at minimal cost were more important than winning decisively, the third faction tried to persuade Japanese leaders that further resistance was futile and that its costs exceeded those of unconditional surrender. Many U.S. strategists also argued that Japan had already been defeated which made continued killing and dying extraneous for both sides; the United States just needed to oblige Japanese leaders to recognize the reality of their situation. Others began to focus more on winning the peace than winning the war and argued against transforming Japan so that it could help the United States balance against the Soviet Union once the war was over.

The Conditional Surrender Faction similarly believed that the costs of further violence in time and lives were too high, and they insisted that the United States conciliate Japan by modifying unconditional surrender. Optimistic strategists believed that Japan had been so thoroughly destroyed that modifying the terms of surrender and allowing Japan to retain its imperial institutions would persuade the Japanese high command to give up the war at last. Pessimistic strategists, on the other hand, insisted that Japan would never surrender and, believing that further fighting would exact a human toll that the United States could not or should not pay, they argued that the U.S. should

relinquish its demands for total victory. Altering its demands would not allow the U.S. to achieve the decisive victory it sought nor remake Japanese society, but it could end the war immediately and save American and Japanese lives. In their minds, the benefits and costs of a conditional surrender outweighed those of unconditional surrender.

Clearly, the debates among U.S. strategists about how best to win or end the war centered on Japan's willingness to surrender. But the major difference between strategists who planned to compel, coerce, convince, or conciliate was the willingness to accept the human costs of war and the value they placed on victory. As the summer progressed in 1945 the Defense and State Departments wrangled about unconditional surrender, the Joint Chiefs began finalizing plans for an invasion while Army Air Force commanders continued burning and blasting Japanese cities, and American spokesmen pleaded with Japan to concede defeat. All the while, a select group of soldiers and scientists began discussing the use of an extraordinary and experimental new weapon.

INVASION

The Invasion Faction insisted that invasion was necessary because only armies could compel Japan's unconditional surrender and because Tokyo gave no serious indication that it was prepared to surrender short of the destruction and occupation of its homeland. U.S. strategists had always assumed that to defeat Japan the Allies would have to invade Japan.⁵ An OPD study determined in September 1944 that, "In order to force the unconditional surrender of Japan, it is obvious that the ultimate planning objective must be the invasion and physical occupation of the heart of Japanese homeland."⁶ The Joint Chiefs agreed at the Second Quebec Conference that same month that the

⁵ *FRUS, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, no. 408; *FRUS, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943*, nos. 103, 380; *FRUS, Conference at Quebec, 1944*, nos. 140, 166, 277, 289.

⁶ *Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945*; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

United States would force Japan to surrender unconditionally by “lowering” both Japan’s “ability and will to resist” through the use of sea and air blockades, intensive bombardment from the air, by destroying Japan’s naval and air forces, and eventually “invading and seizing objectives in the industrial heart of Japan.”⁷ Grand strategies ending in invasion were discussed at every Allied conference and President Roosevelt explained in his final State of the Union address that Japan’s ultimate defeat would require direct, overwhelming strikes “against the enemy homelands.” He noted that all previous operations in the Pacific were merely preliminary actions to establish positions from which Japan’s ultimate defeat could be forced.⁸ U.S. strategists also believed that defeating Japan’s forces in their own homeland was “a prerequisite to unconditional surrender” and they hoped that the capitulation of the home islands would lead to the surrender of the remaining Japanese forces in Asia.⁹ In other words, U.S. strategists, especially Army leaders, justified invasion as the only way to force Japan’s unconditional surrender and guarantee world peace.

The bottom line, for invasion strategists, was that Japan’s military power – its capacity to wage war – had to be destroyed. Army commanders could never see Tokyo surrendering as long as Japan still had men-at-arms in the field and no other strategy could hope to defeat Japan’s armies. In contrast to air power theorists who believed that strategic bombing could destroy the enemy’s will to fight by destroying urban industries and population centers, the Army maintained that wars were still won and lost on the battlefield. Secretary Stimson explained the logical chain between total victory and invasion in his memoirs. “The principal political, social, and military objective of the United States in the summer of 1945 was the prompt and complete surrender of Japan. Only the complete destruction of her military power could open the way to lasting peace,” he explained. Stimson and

⁷ *FRUS, Conference at Quebec, 1944*, no. 166.

⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Address,” January 6, 1945, APP.

⁹ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 599.

other strategists recognized that Japan had been severely weakened by America's "increasingly violent attacks," but the secretary felt there had been "no indication of any weakening in the Japanese determination to fight rather than accept unconditional surrender" and, if the Japanese would not yield, the United States would have to defeat its formidable armies.¹⁰

A redoubtable mission indeed since the geography of the Pacific and the U.S. strategy of Germany First, Japan Second meant that by 1945 U.S. forces still had yet to engage Japan's main land forces. In fact, in addition to the nearly two million soldiers Tokyo could call upon to defend the home islands, according to the intelligence section of the War Department General Staff, Japan had two million soldiers fighting in Korea, Manchuria, China, and Formosa. Another 200,000 occupied French Indochina, Thailand, and Burma; half a million held territory in the East Indies and the Philippines; and 100,000 Japanese soldiers remained on various Pacific islands that the U.S. had bypassed. In total, Japanese army strength numbered approximately five million soldiers. The Japanese navy was nearly extinct, and the Japanese air force relied primarily on Kamikaze attacks which, despite their few numbers, had inflicted serious damage on U.S. naval forces at Okinawa and U.S. officials worried about the destruction they could wreak against an American invasion fleet. By July 1945 Stimson and other officials though there was a strong likelihood that the Japanese might fight to the very end which would force the Allies to defeat and destroy five million men and five thousand aircraft.¹¹

Defeating *all* of Japan's forces seemed like an impossible task and so some strategists had proposed an alternative strategy consisting of perimeter attacks rather than direct invasion. In the fall of 1944, some military planners advocated attacking outlying territories like Formosa or Korea in

¹⁰ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 617-618.

¹¹ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, unnumbered document following Doc. 710, #90; Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 617-618.

order to defeat Japan's forces and reduce its capacity before an invasion of the home islands or perhaps make an invasion unnecessary altogether. The JCS disagreed though, over whether annihilation in the homeland or attrition around the perimeter would be less costly. Considering the recent losses on Saipan, General Marshall had estimated that capturing Formosa would cost 90,000 American casualties. Chinese Premier T. V. Soong later tried to convince the White House that the easiest way to defeat Japan was to fight it in China, but Stimson rejected the idea in his diary as "the very thing that I am resolved that we shall not do unless it is over my dead body."¹² Ultimately, Admiral William D. Leahy thought President Roosevelt would have to decide between the quicker but more costly course, and the longer course at less cost.¹³

Some strategists continued to question whether such an enormous and costly invasion was really their only choice and, although they had always anticipated invading Japan, they looked for alternative solutions that could achieve the same goals at less cost. The Navy, always the Army's rival for leadership and funding, hoped to complete Japan's defeat by closing the Formosa-Luzon bottleneck and bombard Japan from the sea and air to strangle the home islands and compel Japan's surrender without an invasion. The Army Air Forces, seeking their own bureaucratic independence, likewise believed that the B-29 had made an invasion unnecessary because it could destroy Japanese cities, industries, and morale from the sky. But although the OPD considered "every possible alternative operation that might win the war quickly... they always came back to the conclusion that invasion was the only way to certain victory." In spite of the best efforts by American naval and air forces, the Joint Chiefs eventually accepted invasion because blockade and bombardment would probably take too long.¹⁴ Contrary to its military partners, the Army insisted that an enemy's defeat

¹² Henry L. Stimson, *Diary, May 15, 1945*, Manuscript Division, LOC, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

¹³ Maurice Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944*, 488.

¹⁴ Matloff, 487-488.

required the destruction of its armed forces, including Japanese reserves on the home islands, and the conquest and occupation of Japanese territory. The Navy had wiped out the Japanese fleet and blockaded the islands while the USAAF had obliterated nearly every major Japanese city. But had Japan surrendered? It was up to men on the ground now and the Army insisted that nothing less than an invasion of Japan would win the war.¹⁵ The Pentagon thus reaffirmed its invasion strategy in March and April 1945. The OPD's senior representative on the Joint War Plans Committee stated in a memo on March 16 that "the ultimate defeat of Japan will require the invasion of Japan proper and the defeat of her ground forces there."¹⁶

To finalize their last strategies for Japan's defeat, the JCS met throughout June 1945 to discuss plans for an invasion and attended a long meeting at the White House to apprise the president of their thinking. Truman had called the meeting on June 18 to determine the human costs it would require to win the war. He wanted to know the number of men and ships that the Army and Navy would need to defeat Japan and he asked for an estimate of the time and casualties that would be required to defeat Japan by invasion and by blockade and bombardment. Admiral Leahy, Truman's closest military advisor, explained to the Chiefs that Truman intended to make a decision "with the purpose of economizing to the maximum extent possible in the loss of American lives." Economy of time and money was "comparatively unimportant."¹⁷

When the meeting began, the President sought to understand "how far we could afford to go in the Japanese campaign" and he had hoped that the U.S. could avoid "an Okinawa from one

¹⁵ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 292–93; Herring, *The American Century and Beyond, U.S. Foreign Relations, 1893-2015*, 292.

¹⁶ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

¹⁷ William D. Leahy to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 14, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

end of Japan to the other.”¹⁸ Leahy largely opposed an invasion, but the JCS considered the attack necessary to force Japan’s surrender.¹⁹ The Pentagon’s top brass all agreed on plans to isolate, blockade, bombard, and then invade Japan. Because of the remaining Japanese forces in Asia, General Marshall explained that “if the Japanese are ever willing to capitulate short of complete military defeat in the field,” they would surrender when faced with a completely hopeless situation created by bombardment from the air and blockade from the sea, combined with an invasion of the home islands and “the entry or threat of entry of Russia into the war.” The JCS therefore considered an invasion of Kyushu essential to the program of strangling the home islands and believed the invasion would be “the least costly worth-while operation” – that is, the most successful plan at the lowest price. Marshall read a telegram from MacArthur who also bolstered the cost-effectiveness of the invasion. “I believe the operation presents less hazards of excessive loss than any other that has been suggested,” the general opined, “and that its decisive effect will eventually save lives by eliminating wasteful operations of non-decisive character. I regard the operation as the most economical one in effort and lives that is possible.”²⁰ At this point in the war, therefore, an invasion of Japan was the least costly option for the United States without compromising its demands for total victory.

The meeting also largely licked the arguments for blockade and bombardment once and for all. The plans from the Joint War Plans Committee (JWPC) asserted that the United States’ goal had always been unconditional surrender and the committee argued that “the only sure way, and certainly the quickest way to force the surrender of Japan is to defeat her armies on the main

¹⁸ *FRUS, Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, nos. 598, 608; Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945, Other Files, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

¹⁹ Diary Entries, June 1, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Subject File, HSTP, HSTPL.

²⁰ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 598; Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945, Other Files, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

Japanese islands.” The JWPC also noted that unconditional surrender was “foreign to the Japanese nature” and so there was a possibility that Japanese forces would not lay down their arms even after a formal capitulation by their government which would mean that the U.S. would have to defeat Japanese armies everywhere and bombing and blockade simply would not get the job done. And, because the committee could not predict when Japan would concede defeat, it could not estimate the time and losses bombing and blockade would require and concluded, “at best, this strategy will lead to a long war.”²¹ The JCS further argued that an invasion of Japan would be less costly than a broader attack on the Asian mainland and more effective than an isolated bombing campaign. At the time, some officials were still considering an invasion of Korea in advance, or instead of, an invasion of Japan, but staff from the War Department determined that that attacking Korea and seizing Seoul would be even more difficult and costly than assaulting Kyushu. MacArthur also warned that additional auxiliary attacks would only add to the total casualty tally.²²

In addition, the JCS debunked the myth of air supremacy. By the time U.S. troops hit Kyushu’s beaches in November, the JCS expected that the Army Air Forces would have destroyed nearly every industrial target of consequence and obliterated “huge areas” in Japanese cities while the Japanese navy, if any such force still existed, would be “completely powerless.”²³ American bombardment and blockades would also have cut Japan’s capacity for reinforcement from the mainland. But despite the success of LeMay’s firebombing campaign, Marshall felt air power alone was insufficient to knock Japan out of the war and MacArthur contended that a decisive ground attack would have to be made sooner or later. General Ira Eaker and General Dwight Eisenhower both concurred that bombardment alone would not win the war and Marshall added that a ground

²¹ JWPC 369/1, June 15, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

²² *FRUS, Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, nos. 598, 608; Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945, Other Files, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

²³ John E. Hull to George C. Marshall, June 16, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

invasion offered the only way to force the Japanese into “a feeling of utter helplessness.” He did not think the invasion of Kyushu would be any more difficult than the invasion of Normandy the year before, although he wanted every individual moving to the Pacific to be “indoctrinated with a firm determination to see it through.” The military still planned on the continued bombardment and blockade of Japan but their memos indicated that air and naval attacks were not independent attempts at victory but preliminary attacks leading to invasion.²⁴ After weighing all of the possibilities and alternatives, the JCS unanimously agreed that the Kyushu plan was the best option for compelling Japan’s unconditional surrender without engaging all of Japan’s forces in Asia and, by the end of the meeting on June 18, Truman concurred and authorized the JCS to move forward with the Kyushu operation.²⁵

Accordingly, the JCS drafted plans for Japan’s final defeat and occupation – codenamed Downfall. Really, Operation Downfall was two operations: Operation Olympic, which planned for the invasion of Kyushu starting on November 1, 1945, and Operation Coronet, which planned for the invasion of Honshu and “the industrial heart of Japan through the Tokyo Plain” on March 1, 1946.²⁶ Together, the two operations included bombing, blockade, and the landings of 1.3 million soldiers supported by the entire U.S. Pacific Fleet, the British Fleet, and five thousand aircraft.²⁷ General MacArthur would command all land operations, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz would lead all naval operations, and General Arnold would command the strategic bombing campaign from Washington.²⁸ In Operation Olympic, the 6th U.S. Army would spearhead a three-pronged invasion

²⁴ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

²⁵ *FRUS, Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, nos. 598, 608; Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945, Other Files, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

²⁶ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 599; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 175-176.

²⁷ Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 399–400.

²⁸ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 309–10.

of Kyushu while the 8th, 10th, and then 1st Armies would invade Honshu in Operation Coronet and complete the destruction of the Japanese army, and occupy the Tokyo-Yokohama area.²⁹

In preparation for the invasion, U.S. forces would continue bombarding and blockading Japan from Pacific bases while American soldiers from Europe would be transferred to the Pacific and supplies in the Solomons and New Guinea would be moved to the Philippines and Okinawa.³⁰ Soldiers already in the Pacific would be withdrawn and trained for the next operation. Because weather conditions made landings in September and October too dangerous, the invasion of Kyushu was set for November by which time General Marshall expected that B-29s would have destroyed Japanese oil and communications industries, and virtually the entire Japanese air force, leaving Japanese suicide planes as the most serious threat to the invasion.³¹

The total U.S. military personnel involved in Japan's defeat would approach five million and mobilization carried immense baggage.³² Throughout the war, American strategy had emphasized rapid advances and an increasing tempo against Japan which would culminate in an invasion of the home islands. But those same plans also relied upon redeployments from Europe to the Pacific and moving soldiers from one side of the world to the other would take months. Veterans from Europe would only be available for the second stage of the invasion which was scheduled for the spring of 1946, and they naturally wanted to be reassigned to the states, not redeployed to Armageddon in Japan. Although demobilization contradicted the plans for the Pacific, two million GIs were discharged after victory in Europe.³³

²⁹ *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939-30 June 1945*, 181.

³⁰ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 599

³¹ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, unnumbered document following Doc. 710, #116.

³² Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 619.

³³ Heinrichs and Gallicchio, *Implacable Foes*, 4.

Mobilizing so many soldiers, ships, landing craft, jeeps, and medics for the invasion also posed a logistical nightmare, even for a country that had proven its logistical genius throughout the war. U.S. forces had built naval bases as they had advanced across the Pacific since there were no modern ports beyond Hawaii and Australia and, unlike the invasion of Normandy in France, which was planned from neighboring England, the invasion of Japan was planned from Manila, nearly 1,900 miles (3,000 km) away (the distance equivalent to planning an invasion of Washington from Mexico City).³⁴

The overriding concern and critique about an invasion of Japan, however, was its human cost and strategists who opposed invasion did so primarily because they thought the casualties would be unbearable. Truman had previously inquired about “what the price in casualties for Kyushu would be and whether or not that price could be paid” and, while estimates varied, everyone agreed that the invasion would be extremely bloody.³⁵ Japan was the final stop in the island-hopping campaign, there was nowhere else to leapfrog. The Combined Intelligence Committee had reported at the Second Quebec Conference that Japan planned to continue resisting Allied advances in the hope that war weariness and division would lead to a “satisfactory peace” for Japan. Indeed, the report stated that Japanese ground forces would “offer maximum resistance at all points with little regard for losses” while Japanese air forces would “be committed to a scale of defense proportionate to the strategic importance of each area.” During the war, every successive island battle had increased in ferocity and cost from Guadalcanal and Tarawa to Saipan and Peleliu, to the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. In 1945, none of the American military brass had any reason to expect that the battle for the Japanese home islands would be any less ferocious and horrific than the worst battles that the U.S. had suffered in the Pacific. Experience also suggested that Japanese

³⁴ Heinrichs and Gallicchio, 7–8.

³⁵ *FRUS, Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, nos. 598, 608.

forces would continue to fight even *after* defeat or surrender and that “isolated Japanese forces [would] become more ferocious and destructive as isolation [became] more irremediable.”³⁶ Moreover, if Japanese resistance was proportionate to the strategic importance of Japan itself, then U.S. strategists could expect unlimited opposition. Many therefore presumed that the Japanese would sacrifice everything and fight fanatically to defeat the Yankee invaders which could turn the invasion of Japan into the battle to end all battles, resulting in catastrophic American losses. Lt. Gen. Albert Wedemeyer, the former OPD chief planner, had told the JCS in March that “enemy resistance will be intense and fanatic, causing very heavy losses in American lives and material. Every man, woman and child will fight tenaciously for his homeland.”³⁷ Sure enough, knowing that the Americans would invade sooner or later, Tokyo called for “The Glorious Death of One Hundred Million” to prepare Japanese hearts, minds, and bodies to die for the emperor. To U.S. strategists, the program appeared to commit the Japanese to a final showdown that resembled the Wagnerian *Götterdämmerung* of Berlin and Nazi Germany.³⁸

No one could say with any accuracy how many casualties the invasion of Japan would cost, though. Estimates varied wildly based on good and bad intelligence, hatred, fear, and prior experience. As always, military planners focused on executing U.S. operations at minimal cost, but even conservative projections frightened American strategists. The Joint War Plans Committee stated that “The cost in casualties of the main operations against Japan are not subject to accurate estimate,” and Marshall noted on June 18 that “Our experience in the Pacific war is so diverse as to casualties that it is considered wrong to give any estimate in numbers,” but he acknowledged the “grim fact that there is not an easy, bloodless way to victory in war.” Apprehensive about how

³⁶ *FRUS, Conference at Quebec, 1944*, nos. 167, 271.

³⁷ *Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945*; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

³⁸ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 177; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 401.

bloody total victory might be, Truman had recently circulated a memorandum by former president Herbert Hoover who projected the U.S. could suffer half a million to one million casualties.³⁹ Military leaders thought Hoover's estimate was too high, though. Marshall tried to establish a likely ratio of American to Japanese casualties by comparing the battles for the Philippines with Iwo Jima and Okinawa. In the Philippines, Marshall calculated that the fight for Leyte had cost 4.6 Japanese killed and captured for every one American killed, wounded, or missing, but the battles for Luzon (5:1), Iwo Jima (1.25:1), and Okinawa (2:1) had been more even. Personally, Marshall expected that the first thirty days on Kyushu would likely not exceed the price the United States had paid for Luzon and he anticipated approximately 42,000 U.S. casualties – the same number as the first thirty days after D-Day.⁴⁰

Admiral Leahy, however, thought the recent fighting on Okinawa was a better bellwether for Kyushu. He pointed out that the U.S. had suffered thirty-five percent casualties on Okinawa and since Operation Olympic planned to land 766,700 assault troops on Kyushu, Leahy estimated that the invasion would result in over a quarter of a million American casualties (268,345) for the first half of Operation Downfall. Another admiral, Ernest J. King, split the difference between Marshall and Leahy and maintained that the Kyushu casualties would fall somewhere between Luzon and Okinawa. In his telegram, MacArthur also favored a lower casualty estimate and the JWPC thought invasions of Kyushu and Honshu would total 200,000 killed, wounded, and missing Americans.⁴¹ Other projections ranged from 250,000 to half a million American lives. Adding to the confusion and later controversy, was the fact that U.S. strategists could not even agree on a uniform definition

³⁹ A19-2, Hoover Memorandum to Stimson and Marshall Response, May-June 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

⁴⁰ JWPC 369/1, June 15, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow; 5-164 Editorial Note on Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, June 18, 1945, GCMF; John E. Hull to George C. Marshall, June 16, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

⁴¹ JWPC 369/1, June 15, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

of “casualty.” As Marshall’s calculations demonstrated, some strategists tallied casualties in terms of killed, wounded, and missing, others referred exclusively to deaths.

Even the low projections were high though, and every estimate seemed more than the United States could bear. Ellis Zacharias, who spearheaded the psychological warfare campaign, was not involved in the invasion planning, but he believed that Japan was on the verge of collapse and that the high command could be induced to surrender, and even *he* anticipated that the U.S. could lose at least 100,000 soldiers in an invasion of the home islands.⁴² At the other end of the spectrum, the OPD reported that “The best ‘balanced’ estimates the planners could make concerning casualties in the projected Kyushu invasion allowed for at least 30,000 casualties every day for the first thirty days.” For the first month of the Kyushu invasion then, the OPD planned for a *minimum* of 900,000 American and Japanese casualties. Theater estimates ran even higher.⁴³ Regardless of the number of losses though, the JCS agreed with the President that the experience on Kyushu could effectively create “another Okinawa closer to Japan” and they eventually settled on a conservative estimate – 60,000 American casualties for the first two months of fighting.⁴⁴

American fears and estimates increased, however, as the planned invasion drew nearer, because U.S. strategists learned that there were more Japanese defenders on Kyushu than they had thought. Army intelligence counted 200,000 regular Japanese soldiers and 575,000 reservists on Kyushu in June, and intelligence experts predicted a further 350,000 regulars and 600,000 reservists on Honshu. Meanwhile, ULTRA intelligence showed that Japan planned to bring 60,000 troops from Manchuria to bolster the Kyushu garrisons. By August, however, estimates of Japanese

⁴² Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 326.

⁴³ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

⁴⁴ *FRUS, Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, nos. 598; Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945; Other Files, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 178; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 400.

defenders on Kyushu had ballooned to nearly 600,000, dashing American hopes that an invasion might *only* cost as much as Luzon or Okinawa.⁴⁵ Stimson estimated, therefore, that major fighting would not end and Downfall would not achieve its objective until late 1946 at the latest, and he was told that the two operations necessary to defeat Japan might cost as many as one million American casualties in addition to other Allied losses.⁴⁶ No one gave voice to the projected Japanese losses, but the numbers in everyone's heads must have been nearly genocidal.

Even if the invasion successfully defeated all those Japanese defenders, U.S. forces would still have to occupy the home islands which would likely multiply the casualty lists even further. As Stimson observed, as long as the Japanese government refused to surrender, the United States would be forced to conquer and control Japanese territory and destroy their armies in the same kinds of “desperate and costly” fighting which American troops had faced in the Pacific for nearly four years.⁴⁷ On June 28, Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew sent a requested estimate to Stimson on the prevailing conditions in Japan at the end of the war. As the government's most senior expert on Japan, Grew explained that some local, isolated resistance would continue sporadically even after the invasion, defeat, surrender, and occupation of Japan. His memo went on to describe the chilling conditions of total defeat for Japan after a U.S. invasion:

Large areas of the principal cities will have been almost completely destroyed, public utilities in many cases will have ceased to function and communications will have been seriously damaged or destroyed due to the long-sustained bombing from the air and the fighting within the home islands, which it is expected will be necessary to bring Japan to unconditional surrender or to collapse of resistance and passive acceptance of defeat without formal surrender. There will probably be an acute shortage of foodstuffs because of the destruction of accumulated stores, insufficient internal transportation and the effective blockade, which it is expected will have been established after the Japanese navy has been destroyed or rendered impotent and which will prevent importation from abroad. Many

⁴⁵ Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 180; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 399–400.

⁴⁶ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 619.

⁴⁷ Stimson and Bundy, 631.

millions of persons will have been displaced by forced evacuations, by destruction of their homes and businesses, and by the failure of food supplies.⁴⁸

Thus, in addition to American casualties, which seemed unbearable on their own, the invasion and occupation of Japan would have devastated the home islands even further – to the point of total annihilation.

BOMB & BLOCKADE

The dilemma of invasion, however, was that evidence which suggested that invasion was necessary also indicated that it would be incredibly costly; and evidence which indicated that invasion would be successful and less costly also suggested that invasion was unnecessary. Japan was clearly weakened by the U.S. strategic bombing and blockade campaign which intimated that an invasion could quickly overwhelm the home islands and force their surrender but, if Japan was so weak that it could not resist American attacks, perhaps they were not needed. On the other hand, despite its weakness, Tokyo gave no sign of relenting which meant that remaining Japanese forces would continue to fight – perhaps to the death – making an invasion necessary to force their defeat and ultimate surrender, but also intolerably costly.

The Bomb and Blockade Faction supposed to resolve this dilemma, believing that the United States could force Japan's unconditional surrender without incurring the costs of invasion by destroying Japan's capability and will to resist through conventional air and sea power. A paper from the Joint Intelligence Committee in April asserted that "The Japanese will realize that absolute defeat is inevitable when they perceive that their armed forces are incapable of arresting the progressive destruction of their basic economy." Air and naval strategists therefore argued that the increasing destruction due to bombing and blockade, the collapse of Germany, and the entry of the USSR into

⁴⁸ *FRUS, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, vol. VI, no. 386.

the war would convince the Japanese that total defeat was inevitable.⁴⁹ The most prominent proponent of bombardment and blockade was Admiral Leahy who withstood the Army's reasoning at the meeting on June 18. Leahy was never convinced that an invasion was necessary and thought the Navy and Army Air Forces had already defeated Japan or would shortly. (Matloff, 487)

A strategic bombing and blockade campaign largely avoided the issue of enduring American casualties but raised questions about whether planes and ships could induce surrender. No one doubted that an invasion could defeat Japan and compel its unconditional surrender but there was no precedent for bombing an enemy nation into complete submission. In other words, U.S. strategists still had to consider what it would take to break Japan – how much devastation, shock, and blood would the Japanese be willing to endure before they consented to capitulate. And how far should the United States be willing to go – how many cities were they willing to destroy, how many casualties were they willing to exact, how many women and children were they willing to kill – in order to make Japan give up the war?

Since Japan would not surrender, even after the destruction of its military, industries, and cities, U.S. strategists considered adopting any means and removing any limits in order to force Japan to quit and enable the United States to win the war on its terms. Everything was on the table in the summer of 1945. No weapon, tactic, or means was considered too unconventional, outlandish, or inhumane and U.S. strategists discarded any restraint and looked for any technology or strategy that would solve the intractable dilemma of Japanese surrender. Towards the end of July, for instance, the War Department even considered using captured German V-2s against Japan, but

⁴⁹ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

the OPD recommended against it because of operational difficulties. Other planners considered using the JB-2 “Buzz Bombs” against Honshu in March 1946.⁵⁰

Air power theorists were especially innovative and lethal in their proposals to exact a price sufficient for Japan’s surrender. Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault wrote to General LeMay on July 9, and suggested “one last scheme for giving pain to the Jap.” Every year, he explained, when the rice paddies in China flooded, the malaria control officials wanted to “oil them” and, every year, Chennault had to “convince them all over again that you cannot oil a rice paddy” because the chemicals that would kill mosquito larvae would also kill the rice. But now, Chennault wanted to apply the strategy to Japan and use fuel oil to destroy Japan’s crops. “The scheme is simple,” he wrote. “Use your aircraft, flying in small formations, to spray the rice paddies on the Japanese islands, as Saipan and Tinian were sprayed with insecticide, but this time employ some agent that will kill the rice.” Japan was now completely dependent on local food supplies, or would be soon, and Chennault explained how killing Japan’s rice crops could force an end to the war: “If the rice crop this year is reduced even by as much as 20 per cent, millions of Japanese will face starvation next winter. If it is reduced much more than 20 per cent, it is difficult for me to see how the Japanese can carry on the war beyond this fall.” Chennault admitted that dropping oil on Japan’s rice plants was “hardly a classical use of air power” and he knew that his scheme might be “impractical from an operational standpoint,” but he said nothing about the morality of threatening millions of Japanese with starvation.⁵¹ By August 1945, though, the United States had truly adopted a war without limits and pursued any means to force Japan’s unconditional surrender.

⁵⁰ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

⁵¹ C. L. Chennault to Curtiss E. LeMay, July 9, 1945, JAR.

The unlimited air war filled Secretary Stimson with severe moral misgivings and he worried about the ethical consequences of strategic bombing more than anyone else. On June 6, Stimson told Truman he was trying to limit U.S. air forces to precision bombing but since Japan had scattered its manufacturing it was hard to prevent area bombing. The secretary confessed that he felt anxious about the bombing campaign because it was immoral. “I did not want to have the United States get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities,” he told the President. Stimson also worried that the strategic bombing campaign was so successfully devastating that it would diminish the effect of the atomic bomb or even make it unnecessary. He explained, “I was a little fearful that before we could get ready the Air Force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon would not have a fair background to show its strength. In other words, Stimson thought the strategic bombing campaign was already doing the atomic bomb’s job in terms of destroying Japan and that there was a real possibility that the atomic bomb would not be necessary or even possible to use because there would not be any suitable targets left in Japan. Truman apparently “laughed and said he understood.”⁵²

Even as the Truman administration moved ahead with its invasion plans, air force commanders continued to argue that American bombers could win the war on their own. During the Potsdam Conference in July, General Arnold suggested that U.S. air forces could compel Japan’s surrender without invasion by disrupting Japan’s military, industrial and economic systems. In fact, Arnold claimed that LeMay’s planes could force Japan’s surrender in the month before the scheduled invasion on November 1. By that time, he stated, Japan would be “a nation without

⁵² Memorandum for Talk with the President, June 6, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

cities” and, without the necessary infrastructure to hold its populations together, would be unable to resist the terms of unconditional surrender.⁵³

PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

The Psychological Warfare Faction believed that Japan was tired of fighting, not determined to fight indefatigably to the death, and that convincing Japan to surrender did not require so much force. While bombing and blockade could destroy Japan’s capabilities for war, strategists doubted that they could defeat Japan’s will for war and they contended that a ground invasion, while suitable, was unnecessary. Instead of using air, sea, or ground forces, therefore, strategists believed they could persuade Japan to surrender by using psychological warfare. A psychological campaign could convince the Japanese high command that further resistance was pointless, demonstrate that the costs of resistance exceeded the costs of unconditional surrender, and ultimately save time and American lives.

U.S. Strategists presumed that Japan hesitated to surrender because it misunderstood American terms and found them intolerable. So, while U.S. bombing continued, they devised a psychological campaign that used special broadcasts to explicitly target Japanese hearts and minds to induce surrender. U.S. strategists hoped that the combination of bombing and broadcasts, along with a broader rhetorical campaign by the Truman administration would break Japan’s will and convince its leaders to concede defeat. Proponents of psychological warfare appreciated that its methods required few logistics, machinery, or personnel, and they supposed that the campaign could win the war at minimal cost.⁵⁴ Like island-hopping and strategic bombing, the psychological

⁵³ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL; Cline, *Washington Command Post*, 345.

⁵⁴ Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 345.

campaign represented another supposed solution to the dilemma of total victory – a way to achieve Japan’s unconditional surrender while saving time and American lives, thereby achieving America’s major war aims.

Although the Office of War Information (OWI) had previously conducted some psychological operations, the most serious campaign began in the spring of 1945 and focused on Japanese leaders in Tokyo. The germ of the psychological campaign originated with Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal. After witnessing the battle of Iwo Jima, Forrestal became progressively troubled about Japanese ferocity which continued undiminished in spite of all the odds against them, and he worried about the costs of an invasion of Japan. The situation in the Pacific made the dilemma between winning decisively, quickly, and bloodlessly even more urgent, but also more difficult. How could the U.S. stop the bloodshed *and* win the war by exploiting all of America’s available means, Forrestal wondered.⁵⁵ Shortly thereafter, Forrestal was introduced to the Navy’s best intelligence officer, Captain Ellis M. Zacharias. Before the war, Zacharias had served as an assistant and acting naval attaché to Japan and had led the U.S. Navy’s intelligence division in the Far East. At the time of Pearl Harbor, he had commanded the USS *Salt Lake City*, a heavy cruiser, and later escorted the Doolittle raiders. Having lived in Japan and studied the Japanese psyche for years, Zacharias believed that the Japanese were weary of war, and the recent appointment of the moderate Admiral Kantaro Suzuki thoroughly convinced him that Japan was ready to surrender. After meeting in San Diego, Zacharias persuaded Forrestal to let him prepare a strategic estimate of the situation and a plan for a psychological campaign against Japan which aimed to preclude an

⁵⁵ Zacharias, 330.

American invasion of the home islands by broadcasting messages to the Japanese high command via radio to convince them to surrender.⁵⁶

Contrary to most American strategists, Zacharias insisted that the Japanese knew they were defeated, notwithstanding their extremism, and he believed that the Japanese high command was ready to discuss peace. They only needed some persuasion to accept the proffered olive branch. To encourage and capitalize on the enemy's defeatism, Zacharias presented Forrestal with "A Strategic Plan to Effect the Occupation of Japan" along with Operation Plan 1-45. In his plan, Zacharias asserted that "In spite of the fatalistic tendencies of the Japanese – involving individual disregard for life and appreciation of the glory of dying for their Emperor – they are nevertheless realistic people as regards the lessons of history and hopes for the future." A psychological campaign, he asserted, would help Japanese leaders recognize the reality of their military and political situation and give them reasons to accept defeat.⁵⁷

Zacharias felt that the Japanese already had sufficient cause to surrender. He argued that the German surrender gave the high command a suitable "pretext for withdrawal from the war" and he believed that some high-ranking Japanese officials already recognized that the war was lost and that Japan's dilemma would only get worse. As a whole though, the Japanese high command seemed divided about the conduct of the war and their plans for victory depended on unity among their armed forces and an "all-sacrificing prosecution of the war." Outside of the government, there were peace groups in Japan who would be stimulated by psychological attacks to end the war before Japan was totally destroyed and Zacharias noted that the high command faced criticisms from field commanders and that the Japanese people had never fully supported the 1940 Axis Pact. Other

⁵⁶ Marc Gallicchio, "Zacharias, Ellis Mark (1890-1961), naval officer," *American National Biography* (February 1, 2000).

⁵⁷ Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 334, 339–40.

important figures in Japan recognized that continued war with the United States would mean the end of the Japanese empire.⁵⁸ Among the imperial forces, the Japanese Army appeared to want to keep fighting but Zacharias believed that the Navy, given the terrible losses they had suffered, was more aware of their country's helplessness and wanted to end the war, knowing that it could not be won. Zacharias therefore wanted to cause rifts between the two services as much as possible.⁵⁹

In his assessment, Zacharias determined that any invasion of Japan was premised on the fact that an occupation was intended to create an effective and lasting peace, not procure material gains, and the U.S. hoped to end the war quickly and with "the least possible loss of life." A swift, bloodless end to the war would only be possible, however, if "the will of the Japanese High Command could be broken" before the time of an invasion. In turn, breaking the high command and avoiding an invasion would require further pressure on Japan through continued advances through the Pacific and China, the bombing of Japanese ports to demoralize the population, while avoiding attacks on the imperial palace, Ise Shrine, and the imperial family. Lastly, the U.S. would have to adopt intensive psychological warfare to discredit the high command – reducing their effectiveness through internal conflict and indecision, and dishonoring the high command in the eyes of the Japanese people themselves. The psychological campaign was meant to supplement, not supplant, the ongoing bombing and blockade of Japan, but Zacharias firmly believed that the psychological attacks would ultimately make the difference between an immediate and distant peace, and between a bloodless surrender and a costly conquest of Japan. If the United States could not break the will of the Japanese high command, their continued leadership would galvanize every Japanese man, woman, and child to resist to the end.⁶⁰ Forrestal approved the plan on March 19,

⁵⁸ Zacharias, 343–44.

⁵⁹ Zacharias, 360.

⁶⁰ Zacharias, 336, 343. Zacharias struggled to explain, however, why a nation on the verge of surrender was also liable to resist to the end.

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Admiral King gave his consent, and the War Department did not raise any objections so Forrestal brought Zacharias to Washington in April 1945 to serve as an official spokesman of the U.S. government.⁶¹

Zacharias saw the psychological campaign as the culmination of his distinguished Navy career and threw himself into his project. As an intelligence officer, he had always placed more faith in intelligence and diplomacy than in military arms and the same operational bias which led LeMay to view every problem as a target to be bombed caused Zacharias to see intelligence or psychological warfare as an answer to all of America's dilemmas. He read the news of the Okinawa campaign with serious sorrow because he was convinced that the bloodshed could have been avoided with a psychological operation. In his 1946 memoir, Zacharias estimated that the U.S. could have avoided Iwo Jima and Okinawa altogether and shortened the war by six months if it had possessed a more effective and reliable intelligence network in Tokyo.⁶² The ultimate objective of his campaign, after all, was to save lives on both sides and shorten the war by breaking Japanese morale and the will to resist. As Zacharias explained, the psychological attack plan was "To make unnecessary an opposed landing in the Japanese main islands, by weakening the will of the High Command, by effecting cessation of hostilities, and by bringing about unconditional surrender with the least possible loss of life to us consistent with early termination of the war." In that way, American bombs and broadcasts shared the same goal but the psychological attacks aimed "to enforce one's own will upon the adversary by peaceful means."⁶³

To convince Japan to surrender, the campaign primarily targeted Japanese hard-liners whose hopes for victory calculated on American fatigue. They hoped that U.S. officials, or the public at

⁶¹ Marc Gallicchio, "Zacharias, Ellis Mark (1890-1961), naval officer."

⁶² Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 56, 347.

⁶³ Zacharias, 327, 339, 342. David A. Pfeiffer, "Sage Prophet or Loose Cannon? Skilled Intelligence Officer in World War II Foresaw Japan's Plans, but Annoyed Navy Brass," *Prologue* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2008).

large, would tire of the war and its costs and would end the war short of unconditional surrender. But the American psychological campaign hoped to convince Japanese leaders of “the hopelessness of further resistance” and that there was “an alternative to complete annihilation and enslavement.” Zacharias also intended to explain unconditional surrender and to “create dissension, confusion and opposition” among enemy leaders who opposed surrender. Because as long as the high command remained committed to the war and encouraged the Japanese to fight to the end, Zacharias worried that the U.S. would have to assault the home islands and he believed “the cost to us of a full-scale armed invasion in lives would be prohibitive.”⁶⁴

The campaign, therefore, also targeted Japanese moderates and peace groups and hoped to give them ammunition against the hard-liners – something they could present to unyielding militants and encourage them to stop fighting. U.S. strategists did not want to give any indication that unconditional surrender would be modified or mitigated, but they wanted to give Japanese soldiers and officials something to hang their hat on in the face of humiliating defeat and disgrace. Like other strategists, Zacharias considered how best to defeat Japan at the least cost, but he never doubted that “we would have to show the Japanese how to surrender.” By personally addressing individual Japanese leaders in a “factual, direct, intimate” way, the official spokesman could discuss Japanese successes or failures and honor those who wanted to end the war and disgrace those who wanted to continue the war. Through his broadcasts, Zacharias hoped to sow doubt, debate, and difference of opinion to exploit the divisions between Japanese nationalists.⁶⁵ The spokesman could thus encourage Japan to surrender unconditionally and preclude an invasion of the home islands.

⁶⁴ Zacharias, 337, 342–43.

⁶⁵ Zacharias, 271, 329, 338, 344.

To make the case for surrender, Zacharias wanted to speak directly to the Japanese high command. As a high-ranking military official who was known and respected by the Japanese, and as an official government spokesman with the U.S. Navy and OWI, Zacharias broadcast fourteen messages to try to convince Tokyo to surrender. He broadcast an official message for the first time on May 8 after Germany surrendered, and then every week until August 4. Each broadcast focused on a particular theme for about fifteen minutes and was repeated twice, first in Japanese and then in English. The broadcast scripts were prepared and submitted to the OWI and the State Department for approval since the scripts were required to support existing policy directives, and then they were recorded in a “confidential studio” at the Department of the Interior. The recordings were then flown or wired to San Francisco and beamed to Honolulu before finally reaching official Japanese stations via short wave. U.S. stations in Saipan also sent broadcasts to Japan by the same medium used by Radio Tokyo so that the five million Japanese who owned private sets could also listen, while some passages from the broadcasts were also printed on leaflets and dropped by U.S. bombers.⁶⁶

Each message to Japan explained, emphasized, and exploited Japan’s situation, but aimed at giving Japan a chance to make peace, rather than warning them of destruction. First, Zacharias explained the hopelessness of Japan’s position and the futility of further resistance. He cited casualty lists to emphasize the deterioration of Japan’s capacity to make war, to highlight the islands’ loss of sea power, and accentuated Japanese inferiority on land and in the air. He also underscored the additional forces that the U.S. could call upon after the defeat of Germany and pointed out alternatives for Japan – showing there was hope for Japan in a way that there was not for Germany. Zacharias also exploited Japanese admissions of weakness and the fear of invasion. Finally, he

⁶⁶ Zacharias, 328–29, 345, 351, 354.

described U.S. intentions for the end of the war and explained that unconditional surrender did not refer to anything more than the “complete cessation of hostilities and yielding of arms” as described by President Roosevelt to Congress. He further emphasized that a War Crimes Commission would be established, but only those found guilty by a legal tribunal would be punished.⁶⁷

Until the day he died, Zacharias doggedly believed that his psychological campaign was the best way for the United States to win the war on its terms. But others worried that the campaign would go nowhere or perhaps even backfire. Admiral Nimitz opposed psychological operations since he felt confident that the Japanese would simply never surrender while Marines who had battled the Japanese across the Pacific likewise believed that the Japanese would fight to the death and that a bloody invasion of the home islands was inevitable.⁶⁸ At the *Christian Science Monitor*, Joseph Harsch understood that psychological warriors were trying to end the war as soon as possible while faithfully fulfilling the administration’s responsibility to the American people to win the war without further, unnecessary casualties. And Harsch credited the Truman administration with trying to do everything in their power to avoid a final invasion of Japan and thought it would never be possible “to accuse it of not having tried to end the war short of that venture.” However, Harsch also recognized that such a desperate effort to win the war on American terms could in fact prolong the war and make the final attacks more costly by suggesting to Japanese leaders that the American will for war was waning.⁶⁹

Some Japanese officials assumed exactly that. In early June, Isamu Inouye declared that Zacharias’ broadcasts only indicated that “America [was] tired of the war.” He announced that Japan would soon be in a position to accomplish “the unconditional surrender of the United States”

⁶⁷ Zacharias, 344–45.

⁶⁸ Zacharias, 324, 332; Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa*.

⁶⁹ Joseph C. Harsch, “War of Nerves Waged Against Japan,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 25, 1945.

because, when the U.S. realized how costly the fight would be against Japan, it would sue for peace and recall all of its soldiers. Only then could the U.S. and Japan jointly construct the “international machinery” that would produce world peace.⁷⁰

CONDITIONAL SURRENDER

Although the White House and the Pentagon called incessantly for Japan’s unconditional surrender, the will for total victory among U.S. strategists certainly seemed to be waning as conservatives, anti-communists, and other strategists in the Conditional Surrender Faction began campaigning for the Truman administration to modify or mitigate its surrender policy. Ever since Roosevelt had announced the Casablanca Doctrine in 1943, the United States had insisted on unconditional surrender as a mechanism to end the war, make American victory decisive, and to remake Japan. Critics, sometimes among the loyal opposition, had repeatedly asked for a sharper definition and explanation of the policy during that time and now some strategists wanted to modify or abandon unconditional surrender altogether in hopes of persuading Japan to come to the negotiating table.

Thus, while unconditional surrender had always provoked controversy, before 1945, criticisms of the policy had originated outside the administration from the press, religious moralists, and the public at large. But now, as the United States planned for Japan’s final defeat, officials in Washington began to question the value, effectiveness, and necessity of unconditional surrender for the first time. Reformers, conservatives, and anti-communists wanted to modify or mitigate the surrender terms and offered to retain Emperor Hirohito in order to end the war quickly, forestall an

⁷⁰ “Tokyo Seeks A Way For Us Out Of War,” *NYT*, June 3, 1945.

invasion of Japan and save American lives, and to secure a more advantageous postwar position and balance against the Soviet Union.⁷¹

By the summer of 1945, with its cities and factories in ruins and its naval and air forces destroyed, Japan still refused to surrender, and U.S. strategists began to fear more and more that the steps necessary to compel Japan's defeat and surrender would cost more time and lives than they were worth. Considering Japanese resistance on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, an invasion of Japan itself could be intolerably bloody and some U.S. strategists began to worry that total victory and transforming Japanese society were not worth their price in American lives. Consequently, if Japan would never surrender unconditionally and an invasion to compel Japan's defeat would be unbearably excruciating, U.S. strategists believed their best option was to alter their surrender terms. As Radio Tokyo and indirect Japanese overtures suggested that modifying the demands might bring Japan to the negotiating table and lead to peace without further bloodshed, some strategists decided to comply.⁷² By compromising their demands, allowing Japan to retain its emperor and imperial institutions, and forfeiting effective control over Japan, U.S. strategists abandoned unconditional surrender in order to achieve a more acceptable peace. In short, while total victory had always trumped concerns about its timing or costs, some U.S. strategists began to rethink their priorities and determined that saving American lives was more important than decisively winning the war. Hence, they decided to save lives and sacrifice victory.

Other critics contended that unconditional surrender and unlimited war were immoral. In a letter to the *New York Times* on May 21, socialist leader Norman Thomas, who was also a Presbyterian minister and pacifist, criticized the newspaper for supporting unconditional surrender

⁷¹ Heinrichs and Gallicchio, *Implacable Foes*, 9.

⁷² Heinrichs and Gallicchio, 9.

which played into the hands of “Japanese extremists” and invited “fanatical resistance.” Believing that the U.S. could defeat Japan without Soviet help, Thomas worried that “Suicidal resistance” by the Japanese could “drag tens of thousands of our sons to agonizing death” and scar hundreds of thousands of others. Even if the United States succeeded in forcing Japan’s unconditional surrender, “We shall be responsible for policing a broken and embittered people and relieving worse starvation than in Europe,” and Thomas warned that “The ultimate victor will be Stalin and his Communist party.” More generally, Thomas questioned why the United States had to fight “this costly war of annihilation.” Due to “ignoble racism,” some Americans claimed their enemies were subhuman or rats. Others feared the economic consequences an immediate peace would have on Wall Street. Some claimed that unconditional surrender was a necessary punishment for Japanese crimes but while Thomas admitted that Japanese atrocities were horrible and had provoked American atrocities, he argued that “to prolong the war which breeds atrocities is not the way to end them.” Others justified the war as retribution for Pearl Harbor, but Thomas suggested that the United States had not been a virgin victim. Thomas admitted that annihilation made more sense as a necessary means to destroy Japanese militarism and establish lasting peace, but he contended that “There are better ways to overcome militarism than the virtual destruction of a nation” and he doubted whether Japanese militarism would be “permanently destroyed in a world of competing military empires. Certainly its destruction, while white imperialism lives on, will not bring peace.” As a result, Thomas called on the United States to offer terms which would “assure the Japanese, disarmed and stripped of empire, and all the Asiatic peoples, full independence and a share in the benefits of the organized cooperation, economic and political, which we propose to set up.” But he argued that “all honest approaches to peace should be carefully examined.”⁷³

⁷³ Norman Thomas, “Unconditional Surrender,” *NYT*, May 21, 1945.

Ellis Zacharias became one of the leading dissenters from unconditional surrender and began to use his psychological campaign to achieve a conditional surrender. The Roosevelt administration and the JCS had always viewed unconditional surrender as instrumental to Japan's defeat and rebirth but, in the summer of 1945, Zacharias and other strategists began to see the policy as an obstacle that worked against the end of the war even as it promised to rebuild Japan. In his original proposal to Forrestal, Zacharias had remained inflexible on the terms of surrender and demanded that Japan withdraw from the war without any conciliation on the part of the United States, but his campaign soon shifted from clarifying to modifying unconditional surrender.⁷⁴

Zacharias believed that Japan continued to resist because imperial propaganda alleged that unconditional surrender would mean the extinction of the Japanese state and the enslavement of the Japanese people, and that the Japanese high command maintained that the costs of unconditional surrender exceeded the costs of further resistance. To overcome the obstructions posed by Japanese propaganda and the surrender terms, Zacharias used his broadcasts to clarify the policy and help the Japanese comprehend the meaning and implications of unconditional surrender.

The Japanese had always thought unconditional surrender was a cryptic policy, but Zacharias initially believed that the accumulation of Allied documents delineated a coherent policy. Together, the Atlantic Charter, the 1944 New Year's declaration by Chiang Kai-Shek, the Allied declarations issued at Casablanca, Tehran, and Yalta, President Truman's speech on V-E Day, and Justice Robert Jackson's declaration on war criminals presented a clear explanation of American surrender terms.⁷⁵ Zacharias recognized, however, that even after Truman's speech on May 8, unconditional surrender

⁷⁴ Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 340.

⁷⁵ Zacharias, 369.

remained a “dreaded and mysterious term” to the Japanese and he felt that the term had outlived its usefulness by the summer of 1945.⁷⁶

Japan also continued to resist and refused to surrender because, even with all of the bombings and destruction it had endured, the Japanese high command believed that unconditional surrender would somehow be worse than the firebombing of Japanese cities and the strangulation of the home islands. So rather than waiting for Japan’s will or capacity for war to be destroyed – the crossover point at which the cost-benefit analysis would change and unconditional surrender would become preferable to destruction – Zacharias tried to convince the high command that unconditional surrender would not be so bad, that it was, in fact, already better than the destruction that Japan had experienced.

To modify and mitigate unconditional surrender, U.S. strategists proposed to preserve the Japanese emperor. Many Americans wanted to expel or execute Emperor Hirohito but Secretary Stimson, General Marshall, Admiral Leahy, Joseph Grew, and other members of the State Department wanted to keep the emperor to provide needed stability and leadership for Japan after the war.⁷⁷ Since the emperor was also the supreme commander of all Japanese forces, U.S. strategists thought they would need his authority to order remaining Japanese soldiers to stand down and lay down their arms. Admiral Nimitz and Captain Zacharias likewise agreed that the emperor could help facilitate Japan’s surrender and avoid guerrilla warfare and chaos during the occupation. The clincher, Grew said, was that “the presence of the Emperor may conceivably be the source of saving thousands of American lives” since the emperor’s voice was the only one that the Japanese people

⁷⁶ Zacharias, 380–81.

⁷⁷ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 179–80.

or their military would obey.⁷⁸ Saving the emperor, therefore, would potentially save American lives and some strategists believed that minimizing costs was more important than maximizing victory.

Modifying unconditional surrender also coalesced with conservatism and anti-communism. Since America's ultimate victory seemed to be only a matter of time and lives, some U.S. strategists began to put the peace cart before the war horse and, among American conservatives, Dr. Win the War began to give way to Dr. Win the Postwar. Reformers like Joseph Grew, Henry Stimson, former president Herbert Hoover, and Admiral Leahy, all considered modifying unconditional surrender because they did not see the need to completely remake Japan. In the meeting with Truman and the Joint Chiefs on June 18, Leahy had dissented from those who argued that the United States would lose the war unless they forced Japan's unconditional surrender. He did not believe that winning the war and winning the peace were so closely related. Even if Japan did not surrender unconditionally, he did not fear any future threat from Japan "in the foreseeable future" but he did fear that the insistence on unconditional surrender might make Japan more desperate and stubborn, thereby increasing American casualties unnecessarily. Truman had also considered this and had "left the door open for Congress to take appropriate action" on unconditional surrender, but he did not think he could do anything at the time to change public opinion on the matter.⁷⁹ Stimson, Leahy, and Hoover in particular also believed that Japan's economic friendship from the 1920s could be revived and they questioned the need for a full military occupation of Japan and contended that seeds of American reform would sow chaos in the country. Instead, they hoped to eliminate the Japanese militarists so that moderates or liberals could lead their country back to the sunlit uplands of international good-standing.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *FRUS, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, vol. VI, no. 370.

⁷⁹ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 598, 608.

⁸⁰ Gallicchio, *Unconditional*.

Most importantly, conservatives and anti-communists wanted to forestall a costly invasion of Japan *and* Soviet occupation of northeast Asia.⁸¹ Admiral Ernest J. King, for example, believed that the U.S. could finish the task of winning the war without Soviet intervention and, although the costs of defeating Japan single-handed would be immense, he did not think that the administration should go so far as to beg the Soviets to intervene.⁸²

The most important conservative proposal came from former president Herbert Hoover who wrote to Stimson in May and reset some of the discussions about the costs and benefits of victory. Hoover claimed that “If we fight out the war with Japan to the bitter end,” the United States would need one million men to attack the home islands, and possible two million to defeat Japanese forces on the Asian mainland. The time and costs of an invasion and wider war in Asia would likely be so high that Hoover thought the war would open the door for Russia to dominate Asia. The United States, Japan, and China would be so weak that “we are likely to have won the war for Russia’s benefit just as we have done in Europe,” he wrote. However, if the United States made peace with Japan instead of war to the death, the U.S. could save half a million or a million lives and incalculable resources, Hoover thought. The U.S. simply could not afford the costs of continued war with Japan. “Another 18 months of war will prostrate the United States to a point where the Americans can spare no aide to recovery of other nations,” he contended. At this point, Hoover figured that a conditional peace would give the United States the equivalent of total victory – “everything that we can gain by carrying on the war to a finish” – and, more importantly, the U.S. could also “stop Russian expansion in the Asian and Pacific areas” and likely save Japan from going communist. But, if the U.S. continued to wage unlimited war to force Japan’s unconditional surrender, the U.S. would threaten to undermine its own aims. He explained to Stimson, “If we fight

⁸¹ David Greenberg, “Editor’s Note” in Gallicchio, xvi.

⁸² *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 598, 608.

Japan to the bitter end, there will be (as in Germany) no group left who are capable of establishing government and order,” and Japan would have to be divided and occupied by the U.S., China, Russia, and France, just like Germany. Under those conditions, Hoover worried that Japan might follow Germany’s example after World War I and agitate for revanchism and a restoration of Japan’s imperial glories. If, on the other hand, the U.S. negotiated a conditional peace settlement, “there would be the hope that Japan would return to cooperation with Western Civilization and not agitate for revenge for another century as is likely to be the case otherwise.” In short, Hoover argued that unconditional surrender would accomplish the opposite of what the U.S. intended. The policy would destroy Japan, destabilize East Asia, eliminate necessary bulwarks against communism in Asia, and sow the seeds for a future war. For Hoover, therefore, a *conditional* surrender was the best way to remake Japan and preclude another world war.⁸³

Stimson circulated Hoover’s memorandum throughout the White House and Pentagon (sometimes without revealing the author’s name) in order to receive feedback and the former president’s call for a conditional settlement sparked a series of counter-memos in reaction.⁸⁴ General George A. Lincoln acknowledged that the Soviet Union would benefit from the destruction of Japan and China but observed that “Russia appears bound to become the dominant power in East Asia regardless of our action with regard to Japan, unless we completely renounce our war objectives.” The U.S. and the USSR were also still allies and Lincoln was not sure if Japan was ready to accept a peace which forfeited its territories in mainland Asia. Beyond the issues of the balance of power in Asia and Japan’s readiness to surrender, Lincoln took issue with Hoover’s other claims. Of course, peace would save American lives and resources, he stated, but Lincoln rejected the idea that war to the point of Japan’s total defeat would cost half a million lives or “prostrate” the U.S. economy in

⁸³ A19-2, Hoover Memorandum to Stimson and Marshall Response, May-June 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

⁸⁴ Fred M. Vinson to Harry S. Truman, June 7, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

eighteen months. He also doubted that Japan would even accept Hoover's terms or that an early peace would somehow stop Russian expansion. "The point in our military progress at which the Japanese [sic] will accept defeat and agree to our terms is unpredictable," Lincoln concluded. "Like the Germans," Japan continued to resist in order to force the United States to agree to a conditional surrender and Lincoln supposed that Japan would not stop fighting until their position was totally hopeless and that it would likely take a Soviet declaration of war *and* an American invasion, or threat of invasion, "to convince them of the hopelessness of their position."⁸⁵

Joseph Grew agreed with Hoover's position on demilitarizing Japan but argued that the U.S. needed unconditional surrender in order to go further and democratize Japan. In the clearest description yet of what unconditional surrender would mean for Japan, Grew wrote to Truman on June 13 and explained that the United States needed to destroy Japan's arms, disband its military units, demilitarize Japanese industry and try and punish anyone, "whether German or Japanese," who had committed war crimes. But Grew also noted that "The dissolution of the Japanese army and navy would not... of itself effectively destroy the military caste: there must be also a program of intelligent re-education." In effect, Grew asserted that defeating and demilitarizing Japan was only half the battle and the U.S. also needed to implement a positive program of democratization and, to that extent, Grew affirmed that "The complete compass of the terms which we propose to impose on Japan would be considerably wider than the points proposed by Mr. Hoover." Ultimately, Grew stated, the U.S. wanted Japan to abandon "militarism, militant nationalism and other archaic concepts" and regenerate its people and society "along liberal and cooperative lines." To establish a democracy, the U.S. also planned to guarantee freedom of speech and religion, it would revise

⁸⁵ George A. Lincoln to John Hull, June 4, 1945; Giangreco, Dennis – Correspondence Between Harry S. Truman, George C. Marshall, Henry Stimson, and Others Regarding Strategy for Ending the War Against Japan, 1945, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

Japanese education, and abolish “obnoxious laws suppressing fundamental human rights.” “These and other things we would consider necessary to have done in order to achieve a total victory,” Grew explained.⁸⁶

Ergo, Hoover’s proposals for conditional surrender only offered an incomplete victory. Japan would have to give up Korea, Formosa, and its Pacific islands, and pay reparations to China. And while Grew agreed that the U.S. had no desire to destroy the Japanese people or the government, or to “interfere unnecessarily in the Japanese way of life,” any institutions that Japan retained would have to be conducive to its international obligations and to “common peace and security.” However, Grew concurred that the U.S. should permit the emperor to keep his throne since “the non-molestation of the person of the present emperor and the preservation of the institution of the throne comprise irreducible Japanese terms.” If they were allowed to maintain the Mikado, the Japanese would be willing “to undergo most drastic privations,” or commence “prolonged resistance” if the U.S. intended to throw down the throne and try the emperor as a war criminal. Grew therefore agreed that the U.S. should clarify its intentions about Emperor Hirohito because the failure to do so “will insure prolongation of the war and cost a large number of human lives.” In terms of the broader government of Japan, however, Grew insisted that “total victory cannot be achieved without a military occupation of Japan and a period during which Japan would be under military government.” Hoover had claimed that a military government would be impossible in Japan but Grew contended that it was the only way to engender democratic tendencies. “We conceive of the war against Japan as having two components, the military war, and the intellectual war,” Grew wrote. “It would benefit us very little from the long point of view if we were to achieve merely a military victory and fail to pursue the victory into the field of ideas.”

⁸⁶ Joseph C. Grew to Harry S. Truman, June 13, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

Consequently, Grew reaffirmed the need for unconditional surrender. Hoover's conditional peace would not lead to the rebirth of Japan because it would not provide the equivalent of victory.⁸⁷

Zacharias, meanwhile, opposed Soviet involvement in the Far East because he claimed that Japan was already on the verge of surrender and the U.S. did not need any additional, outside, or last-minute aid. This was a poor alibi for his anti-communism, though. He thought the USSR would enter the war only if it had something specific to gain (like Manchuria) and he advised Forrestal not to allow Soviet participation if possible, in order to protect Asia from further communist encroachment. Zacharias was outnumbered, however, by the majority of Americans who turned the second front pleas against Stalin, and Roosevelt himself had wanted Soviet involvement, which he had requested at Yalta. Zacharias though, believed that the military brass consistently overestimated Japan's power of resistance and the strength of the Japanese army in Manchuria and felt that Roosevelt was poorly advised by military officers who had been duped. Ultimately, he believed that the U.S. paid too high a price for Soviet involvement.⁸⁸

Furthermore, Zacharias believed a report received by U.S. intelligence officers which suggested that the emperor was leading the peace party in the Japanese government and that if the U.S. modified unconditional surrender to allow the emperor to keep his throne, Admiral Kantaro Suzuki would resign in favor of Prince Higashi Kuni who would carry out Japan's capitulation and guarantee the surrender terms. Zacharias felt the report was genuine but lamented that it arrived in an atmosphere where Japan's voluntary surrender and collapse were ruled out entirely. After the war, he remained convinced that if the report had been seen by the president and his military advisors, they would have seen the situation in the Pacific differently, Iwo Jima and Okinawa could have been

⁸⁷ Joseph C. Grew to Harry S. Truman, June 13, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

⁸⁸ Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 341, 368–69.

avoided entirely, and the American delegation could have achieved different results at Yalta.⁸⁹

Zacharias thus saw the Tokyo report as an alternative solution that would have satisfied all of the American objectives. From his early and misleading Cold War vantage point, Zacharias contended that if the U.S. had accepted and followed the report, less blood would have been shed and, perhaps more importantly, the U.S. would have occupied a better bargaining position at Yalta and would not have had to sacrifice Eastern Europe to the Soviets. If only American officials had accepted Japanese overtures, the world could have avoided the Cold War. That was indeed too good to be true.

The limits of psychological warfare and Zacharias' optimistic thinking eventually created contention in the Truman administration. In his broadcasts, Zacharias explained that unconditional surrender was a military term which meant that Japanese forces would capitulate and lay down their arms, signifying the end of Japanese resistance. Unconditional surrender did not mean the end of the Japanese way of life and Zacharias interpreted the policy liberally in the hope that Japanese leaders would take advantage of American leniency and end the war immediately. He also repeatedly recalled past relations with Japanese leaders in order to secure their trust in his version of surrender. As an official spokesman, however, Zacharias had no authority to enact military policy and the psychological campaign quickly ran aground of many administration officials and military brass who insisted that the Japanese were determined to fight fanatically to the very end and that their morale would not be broken by soft answers over the radio.⁹⁰ For his part, Zacharias thoroughly believed Japan was ready to discuss peace, but neither the White House nor the Joint Chiefs took the likelihood of Japanese surrender very seriously.

⁸⁹ Zacharias, 335.

⁹⁰ David A. Pfeiffer, "Sage Prophet or Loose Cannon?"

The debates over unconditional surrender and the costs of war soon divided Washington and produced intense bureaucratic conflicts. Zacharias believed that he embodied the majority view. According to him, the War, State, and Navy Departments all supposedly agreed that the terms had to be clarified and mitigated. He even claimed that Roosevelt died just as he was becoming converted to the idea of clarification, as if to imply (incorrectly) that Roosevelt was softening his stance on the war but was replaced by his intransigent vice-president who took a hard line. When Zacharias' team recommended, however, that the Joint Chiefs clarify that unconditional surrender referred only to the cessation of hostilities, not the conditions to prevail after the war, none of the JCS followed the recommendation.⁹¹

Other officials seemed to accept the necessity of unconditional surrender. Herbert Hoover wrote to Truman at the end of May and outlined his own recommendations for a declaration of aims against Japan which appeared to retract some of his proposals for a conditional peace. In his memorandum on "Ending the Japanese War," Hoover thought if the U.S. could adequately explain its aims in the Far East through a joint declaration with Britain and China, there might be "just a bare chance of ending the Japanese war." But while his earlier memorandum to Stimson had denounced the costs of unconditional surrender, Hoover now tacked the other direction and seemingly accepted parts of the policy. Since "the militarist party in Japan has proved a menace to the whole world," he told Truman that the U.S. should insist on the unconditional surrender of the Japanese military and "continued disarmament for a long enough period (probably a generation) to dissolve the whole military caste and its know-how" while certain Japanese officials should be handed over to the U.S. for fair trial. Hoover still believed that unconditional surrender was not worth an invasion though, since "there can be no American objectives that are worth the

⁹¹ Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 380–81.

expenditure of 500,000 to 1,000,000 American lives,” and he proposed that the Allies allow Japan to retain Korea and Formosa as trustees and repudiate any reparations or indemnities. At the same time, the Allies should show that they had “no desire to destroy either the Japanese people or their government, or to interference in the Japanese way of life.” Indeed, Hoover suggested that the U.S. indicate its desire to restore Japan as a prosperous and contributing nation to the civilized world. If Japan rejected those terms, Hoover indicated that the U.S. should continue its unlimited war to annihilate Japan. He told Truman: “if the Japanese Government is not prepared to accept these terms it is evidence that they are unfit to remain in control of the Japanese people and we must need proceed to their ultimate destruction.”⁹²

Hoover held out hope, however, that Tokyo would accept the terms. Admiral Suzuki was a moderate Prime Minister, Japan would be desperate to preserve the Mikado, the middle class was more “liberal-minded” and, in its war against Russia forty years earlier, Japan had made peace before Russia could mobilize its entire might. Hoover also noted the natural Japanese “fear of complete destruction which by now they must know is their fate.” Most importantly for the United States, a conditional peace would also minimize the war’s costs. Hoover ventured that his proposed settlement would achieve “every objective except perhaps the vengeance of an excited, minority of our people.” Japanese swords could still be made into ploughshares, peace would save perhaps one million American boys and immeasurable resources, which would enable the U.S. to return to postwar normalcy more quickly and save the U.S. “the impossible task of setting up a military or civil government in Japan with all its dangers of revolutions and conflicts with our Allies.” Even if Tokyo rejected the olive branch, the U.S. could clearly demonstrate that its sole purpose in waging war was “to establish order in the world.” Peace did not have to sacrifice victory, Hoover asserted.⁹³

⁹² Hoover Memorandum to Truman, undated, but probably May 30, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

⁹³ Hoover Memorandum to Truman, undated, but probably May 30, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

In response to Hoover's second memo, Marshall's staff determined that "The Japanese know they are licked for this generation" and were looking for a way to save face but they objected to Hoover's conditional surrender because the United States needed "an assurance that Japan would not be the focal point of another war." To ensure lasting peace, Japan would have to give up its overseas territories, including Formosa and Korea, as well as any war criminals, and the unconditional surrender of Japanese forces would require supervision and temporary occupation. The army staff also determined that the evidence that Japan would accept U.S. terms was weaker than Hoover claimed. Army intelligence did not think Prime Minister Suzuki and other so-called moderates were any different from the militarists in their national ambitions, idea of Japanese destiny, and ruthlessness. The only differed in their means to accomplish the same ends. The staff also maintained that the Japanese middle class should not be called "liberal minded." In addition, the staff disagreed with Hoover's casualty and economic estimates for the United States but agreed that the U.S. should publicly declare its war aims and define unconditional surrender. However, they argued that the U.S. should highlight its stick more than its carrot. The proclamation, "should be hard and firm in the nature of an ultimatum and must not be phrased so as to invite negotiation," the memo stated. Otherwise, the U.S. risked "seriously impairing the will to war" of the American people which could hamper the war effort, prolong the fighting, and increase the human costs, or lead to a "compromise peace."⁹⁴

Ultimately, even though they all offered to keep the emperor, the difference between Zacharias and Hoover on the one hand, and Stimson and Grew on the other, was that Stimson and Grew were not willing to sacrifice total victory. Zacharias and his psychological team conflicted

⁹⁴ George C. Marshall to Henry L. Stimson, June 15, 1945; Giangreco, Dennis – Correspondence Between Harry S. Truman, George C. Marshall, Henry Stimson, and Others Regarding Strategy for Ending the War Against Japan, 1945, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

most sharply with Grew and the State Department. Although Grew maintained moderate views on the war, Zacharias accused him and his advisors of missing or ignoring the indicators that Japan was ready to discuss peace and being “patriotically and wholeheartedly bent on defeating Japan totally so as to deprive her even of the possibility of rising again as a military power.” Once again, it seems that even U.S. officials did not fully understand or agree on what unconditional surrender meant for Japan and its future as a state or society because that is exactly what Roosevelt had meant by unconditional surrender. In his conversations with Grew, Zacharias found the State Department determined to continue the war, defeat Japan, and not make any deals with the emperor, and Zacharias believed that State officials were too concerned with winning the war decisively, and they should have focused more on winning quickly and at minimal cost. Indeed, Zacharias determined that “The intransigence of the State Department and its apparent inability to recognize the cracks in Japan’s diplomatic armor *ipso facto* disqualified it to act as an important instrument in our dealings with Japan.” Zacharias was similarly disappointed with the Office of War Information, which gloomily believed that Japan was strong, capable, and willing to prolong the war for several more years.⁹⁵ Zacharias, however, believed that such a forecast was not reflected by the military realities of the Pacific, and he felt frustrated with American officials who, he thought, had been duped by Japan’s propaganda machine. For their part, Zacharias and other strategists who advocated for conditional surrender were willing to negotiate a peace settlement short of total victory because they thought saving American lives and ending the war quickly was more important.

As the war dragged on and American casualties piled up, Stimson and Grew fearfully acknowledged the costs of total victory but were, in the end, unwilling to sacrifice unconditional surrender to save additional lives because they still believed that victory was more important than

⁹⁵ Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 333–34.

peace and that unconditional surrender was necessary to remake Japan, prevent another world war, and guarantee lasting peace. Stimson wrote, however, “In light of the formidable problem which thus confronted us, I felt that every possible step should be taken to compel a surrender of the homelands, and a withdrawal of all Japanese troops from the Asiatic mainland and from other positions, before we had commenced an invasion.”⁹⁶ The Secretary of War and other strategists were not anxious to exact and endure more casualties – the prospect of invading Japan horrified them – but, they had determined since the day of infamy to win the war.⁹⁷ If they had to choose – if there was no way to win decisively *and* quickly *and* at minimal cost U.S. strategists were willing to err on the side of total victory and determined to sacrifice whatever time and lives might be necessary to see the war through to its total and unconditional end. However, they hoped desperately that the United States would not have to make that choice and invade the home islands and they looked around in unquiet agony for a panacea that might miraculously resolve America’s victory dilemma. On July 16, 1945, the day before the Potsdam Conference began, the U.S. officials thought perhaps that they had witnessed a miracle.

⁹⁶ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 631.

⁹⁷ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 178; Zeiler, *Annihilation*, 401.

The Atomic Bomb

American fears about the costs of an invasion of Japan certainly defined and dictated U.S. policies but, ultimately, President Truman authorized the invasion of Kyushu despite its potentially high casualties because the alternative paths to peace contained unacceptable military, diplomatic, political, or moral risks and, as a whole, his administration valued victory more than peace. Bombardment and blockade, psychological warfare, and conditional surrender all appeared unlikely to win the war more decisively, quickly, and at less costs on their own than an invasion. Thus, if U.S. strategists had to choose between winning the war and saving American lives, they chose the former, in spite of its costs. The ultimate objective was not to avoid an invasion – U.S. strategists thought it was their best hope of decisively winning the war – but its potential human costs opened them to cheaper alternatives that would nevertheless achieve their supreme goal of total victory. Very few strategists knew, however, that there was another option – a secret solution or potential panacea that America’s top alchemists had been working on for several years – that could possibly cut through the tangled Gordian Knot of decisive, quick, and bloodless victory: the atomic bomb.¹

In this section, I argue that the values, attitudes, and ethics that impelled U.S. strategists to demand Japan’s unconditional surrender, wage unlimited war, and prepare for an invasion of the home islands also culminated in the determination to use the atomic bomb. U.S. strategists remained committed to total victory and they were willing to pay almost all costs to achieve it. However, Japan’s inexhaustible resistance and the projected casualties of total victory were so high that U.S. strategists were desperate for any kind of strategy or operation that might make victory less costly.

¹ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 48.

In the summer of 1945, therefore, U.S. strategists decided to use the new experimental atomic bomb in order to defeat Japan and save American lives.

Insofar as it proposed to save American lives without sacrificing total victory, the atomic bomb was the ultimate silver bullet. If it worked – an enormous and uncertain *if* before July 16, 1945 – U.S. strategists hoped that the bomb would compel, or at least contribute to, Japan's final defeat without a bloody invasion, without changing any American demands, and without waging an indefinite campaign. By using nuclear weapons against Japan, therefore, the United States could potentially achieve all of its strategic goals and win the war decisively, quickly, and at minimal cost. Truman and his brain trust proceeded as if the bomb did not exist, but everyone who knew about it hoped that it could allow the United States to accomplish all of its objectives.²

After years of caustic scholarly debates, historians have largely established a consensus that the Truman administration decided to use the atomic bombs primarily because U.S. strategists wanted to win the war and save American lives.³ Winning the war came first, however. Truman and his advisors undoubtedly wanted to minimize American casualties, as the memorandums and

² Walker, 48.

³ For interpretations which highlight the centrality of American lives in the decision to use the atomic bombs see, Edward J. Drea, *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War Against Japan, 1942-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1992); Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994); Robert James Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Robert P. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1995); Thomas B. Allen and Norman Polmar, *Code-Name Downfall: The Secret Plan to Invade Japan – And Why Truman Dropped the Bomb* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Random House, 1999); Thomas W. Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat: Japan, America, and the End of World War II* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003); Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman*; Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko, *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Andrew J. Rotter, *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); D. M. Giangreco, *Hell to Pay: Operation DOWNFALL and the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1947* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009); John W. Dower, *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor/Hiroshima/9-11/Iraq* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010); Wilson D. Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Japan, America, and the End of World War II*, 3rd edition (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

conversations about defeating Japan demonstrate, but U.S. strategists were nevertheless willing to pay the price of total victory. The atomic bomb was not an alternative to invasion but part of the same strategy to use every available means to defeat Japan, and resulted from the same attitude that prioritized victory at all costs.⁴ For the Truman administration, Plan A was to defeat Japan – quickly and at minimal cost, if possible, but decisively above all else; and invasion and the atomic bombs were both part of the same path to victory. The atomic bombs did not denote strategists' *unwillingness* to pay the price of victory but their very determination.

The strategic and moral justification for the atomic bomb had already been paved by the doctrine of air power and the strategic bombing campaign against Germany and Japan. U.S. strategists saw atomic bombing as a natural stepping stone from area bombing and fire bombing, not as a slide down the slippery moral slope. Indeed, many strategists initially thought that atomic bomb was simply a bigger conventional weapon and only as the Manhattan Project progressed did President Truman and his advisors come to appreciate the awesome magnitude of nuclear power.

To decide how to use that power against Japan, Truman appointed the Interim Committee which recommended in early June 1945 that the United States use the atomic bomb against Japan, immediately, and without warning, against a dual military-civilian target. The committee believed that the bomb could help win the war but dissenting scientists and strategists among the Manhattan Project and within the Truman administration opposed using the bomb on moral grounds. Nevertheless, the administration continued with its plans to defeat Japan at all costs.

The Trinity test on July 16, confirmed that the atomic bomb worked and reinforced everyone's hopes and fears. Truman and his advisors were immensely gratified by the test results and

⁴ Robert P. Newman, "Hiroshima and the Trashing of Henry Stimson," *New England Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (March 1998): 5-32.

became more convinced of the need and value of the bomb. Many scientists, on the other hand, became more certain that the bomb was an immoral threat to international peace and security, and they continued to plead with Truman not to use nuclear weapons.

The atomic bomb thus provides the best representation of the “American Way of War” and U.S. strategists’ moral thinking about victory and its costs during World War II.⁵ The bomb showed how far the United States was willing to go to win the war and illustrated the relationship between American ends and means. In so many ways, the atomic bomb represented the United States’ moral disposition for victory at all costs.

THEORIES OF ATOMIC POWER

Like all other American strategies, the atomic bomb was designed to win the war. The same strategic and moral thinking that informed unconditional surrender, unlimited war, island-hopping, strategic bombing, and other strategies also led U.S. strategists to develop and use the atomic bomb during World War II. After President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized the Manhattan Project in 1940, U.S. officials worked on the top-secret nuclear project not only to develop nuclear weapons before Germany but to develop a means to help the United States win the war.⁶ The United States remained committed to total victory and almost everyone agreed that Germany and Japan had to be completely defeated but U.S. strategists hoped though that the atomic bomb could more effectively compel Japan’s capitulation.⁷ As Secretary of War Henry Stimson emphasized in his memoirs, “it

⁵ Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*.

⁶ The best treatments of the development of the atomic bomb are Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., *The New World, 1939-1946: A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission*, Volume I (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962); and Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).

⁷ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 12–13.

was our common objective, throughout the war, to be the first to produce an atomic weapon and to use it.”⁸

Indeed, like island-hopping and strategic bombing, U.S. strategists hoped that the bomb would enable the United States to achieve all of its goals and win the war at acceptable cost, without having to conquer every Japanese island or city, or perhaps without an invasion at all. The bomb thus resembled a silver bullet insofar as U.S. strategists thought it could make victory more decisive, quick, and less costly. In that sense, they hoped atomic weapons would not only win the war but shorten it and *minimize* destruction.⁹

The atomic bombs therefore represented a distinctly American way of warfare: total victory at the lowest cost in lives.¹⁰ In his final State of the Union Address in January 1945, Roosevelt had alluded to the atomic bombs and connected advances in technology to the need and ability to save American lives. The president declared, “we have constant need for new types of weapons, for we cannot afford to fight the war of today or tomorrow with the weapons of yesterday.” In keeping with American “technological fanaticism” the President asserted that maintaining American technological superiority would result in fewer casualties and warned that “If we do not keep constantly ahead of our enemies in the development of new weapons, we pay for our backwardness with the life’s blood of our sons.”¹¹ By relying on technological panaceas like the B-29 and the atomic bomb, U.S. strategists hoped to achieve total victory without making a total sacrifice.

⁸ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 613.

⁹ Stimson and Bundy, 613; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 5–7; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 10–11.

¹⁰ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 14.

¹¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Address,” January 6, 1945, APP.

Pessimism among the War Department and Far Eastern specialists in the State Department made officials susceptible “for using any device that would cause the Japanese to surrender quickly.”¹²

The military and moral paths for using the atomic bomb were paved by strategic air power and the same values, attitudes, and ethics that planned for strategic bombing and firebombing also justified atomic bombing. Because U.S. leaders authorized the atomic bomb and planned for its use outside of the regular strategic channels, before any military theory or doctrine had been developed for nuclear power, U.S. strategists applied the same theories of air power and strategic bombing that they had used against Germany and Japan. Morally, there did not seem to be any difference between destroying enemy cities with high explosives, incendiaries, or nuclear bombs and by the time the bomb was ready to use in August 1945, U.S. strategists had largely come to accept the principles and practice of strategic bombing or “terror bombing” against civilian populations. U.S. strategists also believed that the atomic bombs were necessary to force Japan’s surrender and as the historian Gerard J. DeGroot has asserted: “military necessity was the mother of moral justification.”¹³

When the Manhattan Project began, however, the atomic bomb was often regarded as just another bomb. In fact, Winston Churchill apparently told the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Neils Bohr that the atomic bomb was just a bigger bomb; it worked according to the fundamental principles of war, it did not change them. Roosevelt seemed not to appreciate that he had an ace up his sleeve.¹⁴ Later, U.S. strategists would view nuclear weapons as revolutionary advances in technology and warfare, but Roosevelt and Churchill never assumed that the bomb would force Japan to surrender unconditionally all by itself and win the war on its own. They saw the bomb as an expansion, not a transformation, of Allied military capabilities. And since the bomb was just a larger

¹² Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

¹³ Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Bomb: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 68.

¹⁴ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 14, 17.

and more powerful bomb, it followed the same moral assumptions that directed conventional bombing. Stimson regarded the atomic bomb as “a new and tremendously powerful explosive” but one that was “as legitimate as any other of the deadly explosive weapons of modern war.”¹⁵ The atomic bomb was not born with any kind of moral birthmark or stigma – at least not more than any other bomb – and it was considered immoral only to the extent that war itself was immoral.

The strategic purposes of the atomic bomb were therefore decided long before the weapon was ready. In September 1944, Roosevelt and Churchill met at Hyde Park, New York, and formally agreed on the military use of the bombs. The President and the Prime Minister agreed that “when a ‘bomb’ is finally available, it might perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese, who should be warned that this bombardment will be repeated until they surrender.”¹⁶ Although the two leaders recognized by that point that the atomic bomb represented a tremendous expansion and escalation of explosive capabilities, the objective and purpose of atomic bombing was the same as conventional and fire-bombing. Until the fateful summer of 1945, no one knew the exact circumstances in which the bomb might be deployed but, when the moment for consideration arrived, the use of atomic weapons was connected to the larger purposes of winning the war.

At the same time, U.S. strategists knew they were working on something big and, gradually, they began to appreciate the awesome power that an atomic bomb could unleash and began to consider the moral implications of using such a forceful weapon.¹⁷ Stimson insisted that everyone “understood the terrible responsibility involved in our attempt to unlock the doors to such a

¹⁵ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 613.

¹⁶ *FRUS, Conference at Quebec, 1944*, no. 299; *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1306.

¹⁷ Michael D. Gordin, *Five Days in August: How World War II Became a Nuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

devastating weapon” and Roosevelt spoke with his Secretary of War many times about “the catastrophic potentialities” of the atomic bomb.¹⁸

After Roosevelt’s death, it fell to Stimson to tell the new president about the atomic bomb and impress upon him the tremendous power it contained. The Manhattan Project was such a top-secret enterprise that only a handful of high-ranking U.S. officials even knew about it. Even the man formerly known as the Vice President of the United States did not know about the atomic bomb. On the evening of April 12, 1945, after Harry Truman’s first cabinet meeting in the Oval Office, everyone left the room except for Stimson who asked to speak with the new commander-in-chief about “a most urgent matter.” The Secretary of War explained that Roosevelt had commissioned a mammoth scientific, engineering, and military project to develop “a new explosive of almost unbelievable destructive power.” This was the first Truman had heard of the Manhattan Project. James Byrnes gave the new president more details the next day since Byrnes had served as the director of the Office of War Mobilization from 1942 to 1944. Mostly, he instilled the solemn reality that the Manhattan Project was a gigantic undertaking involving enormous quantities of money and resources in order to create a weapon “great enough to destroy the whole world.”¹⁹

On April 25, Truman met with Stimson and General Leslie Groves, the project director, who briefed the President on the finer details of the Manhattan Project although he tried not to over-emphasize the power of a single bomb.²⁰ Byrnes had already told the president that “the weapon might be so powerful as to be potentially capable of wiping out entire cities and killing people on an unprecedented scale,” while Stimson confirmed that “Within four months we shall in

¹⁸ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 613.

¹⁹ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, vol. 1 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), 10–11; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 28, 30; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 13.

²⁰ Leslie R. Groves, Report of Meeting with The President; National Archives, Memorandum on Meeting Between Harry S. Truman and General Leslie Groves, April 25, 1945, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL; Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:87.

all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history, one bomb of which could destroy a whole city.”²¹ As he learned of this new weapon, Truman took seriously his constitutional responsibility as commander-in-chief to authorize its wartime use. Doubts about the bomb persisted, however. Admiral Leahy told Truman the project was an alchemist’s dream and called the Manhattan Project “the biggest fool thing we have ever done.” He skeptically predicted that “The bomb will never go off, and I speak as an expert in explosives.”²²

Truman was duly impressed and awed by the potential power of the atomic bomb, but he also understood that the bomb’s destructive capacity could enable the U.S. to dictate its own terms and possibly shorten the war. He later explained that the primary objective of the Manhattan Project was to create a weapon so powerful that Japan would be forced to surrender but he also believed that such a powerful weapon could make conventional attacks unnecessary and, hence, save American lives.²³ Paradoxically, therefore, the Manhattan Project intended to create a weapon that could defeat the enemy and win the war by maximizing destruction on the one hand and minimizing it on the other.

HOW TO USE THE ATOMIC BOMB

To decide how to use the atomic bomb’s tremendous power, Truman appointed an advisory group known as the Interim Committee which considered the strategic and moral questions of atomic weapons. Stimson presided over the committee but George L. Harrison served as chair in his absence while James F. Byrnes served as the personal representative of the president as a private citizen. The committee also included Ralph B. Bard, the Undersecretary of the Navy, William L. Clayton, Assistant Secretary of State, and three atomic scientists: Dr. Vannevar Bush, the director of

²¹ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 635; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 13.

²² Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:11; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 32–33.

²³ Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:87, 418.

the Office of Scientific Research and Development; Dr. Karl T. Compton, the chief of the Office of Field Service in the Office of Scientific Research and Development; and James B. Conant, the chairman of the National Defense Research Committee. The three scientists also doubled as university presidents and presided over the Carnegie Institution of Washington, MIT, and Harvard University respectively.²⁴

The Interim Committee met on five occasions between May 9 and June 1 and consulted with their Scientific Advisory Panel, the War Department's Target Committee, and Westinghouse, DuPont, and Union Carbide which helped to manufacture the atomic bombs. The committee focused on drafting statements to be issued after the bomb's first use, a bill for domestic control of atomic energy, and recommendations for international control of atomic energy. The most immediate question for the committee, however, was how the atomic bomb should be used against Japan.²⁵

The committee understood that the purpose of the bomb was to physically destroy Japan's capacity for war and to psychologically destroy their will for war. There was never a question about *whether* the bomb should be used and not using the bomb at all was never brought up. Indeed, at no point did the president or anyone else in the administration suggest that atomic weapons should not be used in the war. The first ever question of atomic energy, therefore, was how to employ its destructiveness, not how to prevent, avoid, or restrain it.²⁶

The Interim Committee soon decided that the United States should use the atomic bomb to maximum effect. In their discussion during a lunch break on May 31, some members pointed out

²⁴ Truman, 1:419; Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 616; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 33; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 14.

²⁵ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 617; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 43.

²⁶ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 613; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 34; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 14–15.

that an atomic attack on a military arsenal would not be any more effective (or any more immoral) than a strategic air attack with incendiaries and high explosives. In other words, some officials worried that an atomic bomb would not be powerful enough to have the desired effect on Japan, but Oppenheimer reassured them that the visual effects of the bomb would be much more dramatic than a conventional strike. Others suggested that the U.S. could first demonstrate the bomb's power publicly, as a warning, before detonating the bomb on a Japanese city. However, most of the committee members did not think that a demonstration would be threatening or meaningful enough to convince Japan to surrender. Others pointed out that an exhibition explosion could backfire. If the bomb failed to explode, if the plane was shot down, or if the Japanese moved American prisoners to the target site, the demonstration could do more harm than good to America's war effort. It only took around ten minutes, therefore, for the Interim Committee to decide that a demonstration was inadvisable, and they determined that the bomb should instead be used against a city with vital war plants in order "to make a profound psychological impression on as many of the inhabitants as possible."²⁷

The Interim Committee did not explicitly discuss the morality of the atomic bomb, but moral considerations clearly influenced members' thinking and they certainly appreciated the ethical dilemma of using the bomb to try to win the war. This was, in effect, the same tactical and moral conundrum as strategic bombing and firebombing. As John Ford had asked in his critique of obliteration bombing, how could a bomber target a factory without targeting the workers in it? Or, in the case of the atomic bomb, how could a B-29 target any objective in a Japanese city without targeting not only the war workers who lived nearby but all of the other inhabitants; and how could the U.S. justify such an attack?

²⁷ R. Gordon Arneson, Notes of the Interim Committee Meeting, May 31, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 49.

The minutes of their meetings indicate that the committee did not want to target and kill civilians directly – they seemed to believe that doing so would be immoral. But civilian casualties would also be unavoidable because of the presumed power of the atomic bomb and the topography of Japanese industries. The committee regarded civilian casualties as more than collateral damage, though. Despite their moral qualms, committee members believed that civilian casualties were expedient and even beneficial since the U.S. wanted to maximize the psychological impact of the bomb and exact a price so intolerable that Tokyo would consent to surrender. Some members even suggested attempting several atomic bombings simultaneously to optimize the bomb’s psychological effects. Oppenheimer admitted that “several strikes would be feasible” but General Groves objected because the U.S. would lose the advantage of gaining additional knowledge with each bombing; multiple attacks would rush the assembly and risk the bomb’s effectiveness; and the attacks would not be different enough from conventional strategic bombing. Since the committee regarded killing Japanese civilians as immoral but unavoidable and necessary, they decided that the ideal target would be “a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers’ houses.” In this way, the committee did not actually resolve the moral dilemma of bombing civilians. Rather, they sidestepped the issue by attacking a “dual target.” The committee implicitly acknowledged that intentionally targeting civilians was wrong and justified the atomic bomb by explicitly claiming to attack a precise military target even though the committee knew, and intended, that thousands of Japanese civilians would be killed.²⁸

After nearly four weeks, the Interim Committee unanimously recommended on June 1 that the “big bomb” be deployed against Japan as soon as possible against a “dual target, that is a military installation or war plant surrounded by or adjacent to homes or other buildings most susceptible to

²⁸ R. Gordon Arneson, Notes of the Interim Committee Meeting, May 31, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

damage,” and that the bomb be used “without prior warning.”²⁹ This way, the attack would suitably showcase the bomb’s destructive power. Any other course of action jeopardized the objective of forcing Japan’s surrender as soon as possible.³⁰ The Interim Committee reaffirmed its position on the atomic bomb on June 21 and repeated that “the weapon should be used against Japan at the earliest opportunity, that it be used without warning, and that it be used on a dual target, namely, a military installation or war plant surrounded by or adjacent to homes or other buildings most susceptible to damage.”³¹

Of course, at the end of the day, the Interim Committee was only an advisory group; the final recommendations lay with Stimson and the final decision rested with President Truman. Stimson independently reached the same conclusions as the committee, however. He believed that “to extract a genuine surrender from the Emperor and his military advisers, there must be administered a tremendous shock which would carry convincing proof of our power to destroy the Empire. Such an effective shock would save many times the number of lives, both American and Japanese, that it would cost.”³² Meanwhile, President Truman recognized that, as commander-in-chief of all American forces, “The final decision of where and when to use the atomic bomb was up to me.” “Let there be no mistake about it,” he wrote, “I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used.”³³

Even though it had no power to make policy and its recommendations were not binding, the Interim Committee represented the first think tank on nuclear weapons and its considerations highlighted the most salient issues about the atomic bombs: the determination to end the war on

²⁹ R. Gordon Arneson to George L. Harrison, June 6, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

³⁰ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 617; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 181–82; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 43; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 15.

³¹ R. Gordon Arneson to George L. Harrison, June 25, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

³² Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 617.

³³ Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:419.

American terms (decisively, quickly, and bloodlessly), the assumption that the bomb would be used once it was available, the willingness to attack civilians as a legitimate means to win the war, and the hope that the bomb would advance American diplomacy with the Soviet Union.³⁴ Morally, the Interim Committee demonstrated once more that winning the war mattered more than anything else. Committee members touched on a variety of issues but Truman's only concern was whether the bomb could contribute to Japan's defeat and the end of the war.³⁵

The Interim Committee left the more detailed atomic planning and targets to the military. The War Department's Target Committee consisting of Brig. Gen. Thomas F. Farrell, Dr. Oppenheimer, and other military and scientific officials convened on May 10-11, 1945, to discuss where the atomic bomb would be used and they evaluated each Japanese city according to its military, economic, and psychological merits. In particular though, the committee focused on large urban areas (greater than three miles in diameter) that were "capable of being damaged effectively by a blast" and likely to remain unaffected by August in order to maximize the bomb's shock value.³⁶

The committee discussed six targets: Kyoto, Hiroshima, Yokohama, the Kokura Arsenal, Niigata, and the emperor's palace, and each target had unique advantages and challenges for an atomic attack. With a population of one million, the former capital of Kyoto encompassed a large industrial area while Hiroshima contained 350,000 people and an "important army depot and port of embarkation" which qualified it as an "army" city and a suitable military target for U.S. strategists. With the damage to Tokyo, many industries had relocated to Yokohama which remained untouched as yet, although most of its important targets like aircraft and machine tool manufacturers and oil

³⁴ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 18.

³⁵ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 33, 39.

³⁶ J. A. Darry to Leslie R. Groves, May 12, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Vertical File, HSTP, HSTPL; John Stone to General Arnold, July 24, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Subject File, HSTP, HSTPL; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 43-44.

refineries were separated by a large body of water and guarded by heavy anti-aircraft defenses. The Kokura Arsenal, one of Japan's largest, produced light military ordnance, anti-aircraft, and beach defenses and was surrounded by urban industrial structures with 178,000 people. As other ports were damaged, Niigata was becoming more important as a point of embarkation on the northwest coast of Honshu and the city also featured industries for machine tools and oil refineries among its 150,000 people. Lastly, the committee discussed the emperor's palace but did not recommend it as a target.³⁷

Most of all, the committee wanted to make a big bang – physically and psychologically. Even though they examined military targets, for the first bomb the members agreed that “any small and strictly military objective should be located in a much larger area” so as to maximize blast damage and minimize the risk that the weapon would be wasted due to poor placement. Thus, the members wanted to make a psychological impact on Japan and aimed to make the bomb's performance “sufficiently spectacular” so that the weapon's importance would be immediately recognized around the world. As an intellectual center, Kyoto had the psychological advantage of an intelligent population who would appreciate the significance of “the gadget.” The size of Hiroshima, and its position near the mountains which could produce a “focusing” effect, meant that a large portion of the city could be destroyed, further adding to the bomb's “wow” factor. The emperor's palace in Tokyo was clearly the most renowned target but lacked strategic value.

The number one concern for the committee, therefore, was damage – and they selected targets according to the amount of devastation that the bomb could inflict on Japan. To maximize the damage, the committee also talked about conducting an incendiary bombing raid *after* the atomic bomb had been dropped, as if the bomb would not be destructive enough. The gadget would likely

³⁷ J. A. Darry to Leslie R. Groves, May 12, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Vertical File, HSTP, HSTPL.

paralyze the Japanese' ability to fight fires so a serious conflagration could be started. Hiroshima's only disadvantage in this regard was that it occupied a plain of rivers which meant incendiaries would be less destructive there. In the end, the committee decided against a follow-up incendiary raid, not because of any humane feeling for the Japanese, but because of their concerns that radioactive clouds from the bomb could threaten American air crews. There was no mention of radioactive effects on the Japanese.³⁸

LIMITS OF THE ATOMIC BOMB: MORAL CRITICISMS

Not everyone agreed with the Interim Committee's decisions and values, however, and the atomic bomb faced serious criticisms from scientists and a few strategists who opposed using the bomb on moral grounds.

One of the longest critiques came from Oswald C. Brewster, an engineer with the Kellogg Corporation who had worked on the Manhattan Project since February 1942. While working on gas diffusion to enrich uranium, Brewster recognized that the project was developing fissile material for a nuclear weapon. On May 24, he wrote to President Truman to voice his concerns about the atomic bomb and sent copies to Secretary Stettinius and Secretary Stimson who called it "the letter of an honest man."³⁹ General Groves, who directed the project, interviewed Brewster and likewise determined that the engineer was "a sincere individual, obsessed by a strong feeling that the further development of this project will be detrimental to the U.S.A. and the world."⁴⁰ Brewster wrote only as a private citizen, and he recognized that more senior officials were considering the issue and that he held "the unpopular and minority view on the question." But for those reasons, he also believed

³⁸ J. A. Darry to Leslie R. Groves, May 12, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Vertical File, HSTP, HSTPL.

³⁹ Henry L. Stimson to George C. Marshall, May 30, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

⁴⁰ Leslie R. Groves to Henry L. Stimson, May 30, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

it was “his duty as a loyal citizen” to present his ideas “on the chance that they have not been presented to you before” and that some of his ideas might be important for world politics and world peace. He admitted he did not know all the information and that he was not qualified as a physicist to assess the effectiveness of the project so “I can only pass on what I have been told and believe to be substantially true.”⁴¹

When he had first joined the project, Brewster had been told that one fifty-pound bomb of atomic material would be the equivalent to 12,000 tons of TNT and that “such a bomb would completely destroy an area the equivalent of Manhattan and, due to induced radio activity, all life in this area would be impossible for a period of years.” The bomb might only be five hundred times more powerful instead of five hundred thousand, but Brewster noted that his suppositions would be wrong only in degree.

The destructive possibilities of atomic weapons threatened to revolutionize warfare and Brewster’s concerns echoed the projections of Giulio Douhet who had suggested a generation earlier that strategic air power could win wars decisively at a single blow. Brewster wrote,

it should be possible, with planes based in any country on the globe, to destroy at one fell swoop almost any great city in the world and wipe out the manufacturing, the fleets, and the supply bases of any other country without warning, thereby rendering it helpless almost before it realized it had an enemy.

The country producing such a weapon during the course of a war would gain such an enormous advantage over its enemy that victory would be almost assured regardless of its condition just prior to putting it to use.

But while Douhet and the Bomber Mafia had trumpeted strategic air power, Brewster denounced it. He even argued that nuclear weapons were so powerful that they would destroy human civilization. “From my first association with this project I have been convinced, and have

⁴¹ O. C. Brewster to Harry S. Truman, May 24, 1945; 2-3 Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

been appalled by the conviction, that the successful production of this material by any nation meant the inevitable destruction of our present day civilization,” he explained. Many of his colleagues felt the same way. In fact, Brewster admitted that many of them hoped the bomb would not work. “One of the most earnest hopes of many of us was that it might be conclusively proved that the thing was impossible,” he wrote. But even more terrible than an atomic bomb was the idea of a German bomb. Brewster explained,

so long as there was any chance that Germany might succeed at this task there was only one course to follow and that was to do everything in our power to get this thing first and destroy Germany before she had a chance to destroy us. We must forget about the destruction of civilization or at least we must agree that, if civilization is to be destroyed, we should do it our way and prevent Germany from doing it the Nazi way.

The United States thus had to save civilization from the Nazis, even if it meant destroying civilization in the process. By doing evil, the U.S. could preclude a far greater evil and, therefore, do good. Proponents of the bomb might argue that human civilization was not at stake, but Brewster insisted that “The idea of the destruction of civilization is not melodramatic hysteria or crack-pot raving. It is a very real and, I submit, almost inevitable result. It cannot, of course, be proven until it occurs – and then it would be too late.”

Nuclear weapons would also ruin international relations because the nation that wielded the atomic bomb would be so much more powerful than everyone else. Brewster insisted that “The possession of this weapon by any one nation, no matter how benign its intentions, could not be tolerated by other great powers. Those who could not produce the weapon themselves would watch our every move.” Having the atomic bomb, everything the United States did “would be viewed with suspicion.” Brewster predicted,

If we urged our views on the world on any subject we would be charged with threatening to use this weapon as a club. We would be toadied to and discriminated against, all the world would do lip service as our friends and conspire and intrigue against us behind our backs. We would be the most hated and feared nation on earth.

In the meantime, everyone else would try to build their own bombs. Even America's best friends could not stake their preservation on the good faith of the United States and rivals would want to protect themselves. If Mexico, France, or Great Britain were the sole possessor of the atomic bomb, the United States would not "rest complacently," Brewster affirmed, and neither could the U.S. expect its friends and neighbors to meekly accept America's nuclear monopoly. Even if the United States had exceptionally benign intentions, Brewster warned that the atomic bomb would start a nuclear arms race "and sooner or later the spark would be struck that would send the whole world up in one flaming inferno of a third world war which would dwarf the horror of the present one."

Furthermore, America's good intentions and peaceful nature could be corrupted by such destructive power. Brewster wanted to believe that the United States was exceptional, but he feared that his country was not immune to temptation and over time could follow the same path as Germany. Brewster asserted that "Even this country, knowing that it could, if it chose, rule the world, could in the course of time acquire the same Herrenvolk complex that led to the destruction of Germany but which might lead to the destruction of the world the next time." The atomic bomb could also provoke the emergence of America's own Hitler since "the possession of this power by our country would offer a prize more tempting to the corrupt and venal demagogue than had ever been dangled before the eyes of man." Gradually, a demagogue could lay his plans, build his following, acquire power "and only then, he could turn on us and the world and conquer it for his own insane satisfaction." Brewster was not sure exactly how those events could come about but he felt absolutely certain that "if this thing exists on earth while men still have greed and hate and lust of power," then it was only a matter of time before a nefarious leader or decadent nation unleashed a nuclear war on the world. In short, the atomic bomb was too powerful to be wielded safely and Brewster insisted that "This thing must not be permitted to exist on this earth." As long as the Nazis

threatened to build a bomb, the United States had to meet that threat but now that Germany had surrendered, “we must stop this project.”

World War II indicated that the world could not tolerate World War III but Brewster worried that another war would break out if human beings took possession of nuclear weapons. He therefore proposed that the United States announce its atomic project, offer to demonstrate the bomb’s awesome power, and then renounce any use of nuclear weapons if the rest of the world would agree never to produce any nuclear material for destructive purposes. The U.S. could find a way to monitor and enforce the anti-nuclear agreement and Brewster had enough faith in human nature to think that even Russia would consent to nuclear supervision and restraint. Germany and Japan could be forced to abide as well.

The war with Japan was not over, however, and some of Brewster’s colleagues had accused him almost of treason for suggesting that the Manhattan Project should be stopped before Japan surrendered. Brewster accepted that a Japanese target could serve as the demonstration for the bomb, but he questioned whether further nuclear production would be necessary to force Japan’s surrender. He did not want to jeopardize the war effort, but he contended that an invasion of Japan would be preferable to nuclear attacks. He wrote, “horrible as it may seem, I know that it would be better to take greater casualties now in conquering Japan than to bring upon the world the tragedy of unrestrained competitive production of this material.” In Brewster’s mind, the use of nuclear weapons was a greater evil than even an invasion of Japan.

Only the president could make the decisions to resolve the moral, strategic, and political problems of the atomic bomb, however. Brewster did not trust the project’s military leaders to make the decision because of their dedication to victory and national security, and the civilians on the project were too committed to scientific progress. As Brewster wrote,

Without discrediting the humanitarianism or honesty of the Army at all, surely it is not the one to decide the future course of this project. Such a weapon is the answer to all the prayers of the professional soldier. He cannot be expected to forego willingly such a potent means of bringing victory to or preparing the defense of his country.

The rest of us – the civilians in the project – are so intent on making it succeed that the suggestion that it should be stopped is rank heresy, if not treason, to most.

The problem was that the soldiers and the scientists were the only people who knew about the project and, therefore, the only ones who could think about it. As a result, Brewster urged the President to consult with trusted men of unbiased judgment who could study the problem deeply, consider all sides, and then decide the future of the bomb, the nation, and the world. Brewster hoped, however, that nuclear weapons would never be used.⁴²

Undersecretary of the Navy Ralph B. Bard, who had agreed with the Interim Committee's proposals, suddenly changed his views and dissented from the recommendation to use the atomic bomb without warning. In a memorandum on June 28, Bard explained that he felt "Japan should have some preliminary warning" two or three days in advance of the bomb's use. A warning, he believed, would suit the United States' reputation as "a great humanitarian nation and the fair play attitude of our people." Moreover, since Tokyo seemed to be searching for an opportunity to surrender, Bard suggested that U.S. emissaries could contact Japanese representatives and inform them about Russia's position and atomic power, along with whatever assurances the U.S. wanted to provide about the emperor and unconditional surrender. Bard figured that the U.S. did not have anything to lose by this program and advised that "The only way to find out is to try it out."⁴³ Bard did not explain the reasons for his reluctance or what he thought the U.S. stood to gain by warning

⁴² O. C. Brewster to Harry S. Truman, May 24, 1945; 2-3 Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

⁴³ George L. Harrison to Henry L. Stimson, June 28, 1945, courtesy of Philip Zelikow.

Japan, though. He did not state that the bomb was immoral, he merely indicated that using the atomic bomb without warning would be inconsistent with American humanitarianism and fair play.

Other, more senior scientists on the Manhattan Project argued against using the bombs as well. At the end of May, three of the leading atomic scientists – Leo Szilard, Walter Bartky, and Harold Urey – had traveled to James Byrnes' home in Spartanburg, South Carolina, to directly suggest that the United States either not use the atomic bomb, or that the Truman administration should warn Japan before the bomb's initial use. Byrnes, however, had become invested personally and politically in the project's success and he dismissed both suggestions since he felt determined to ensure that the project justified its exorbitant costs. Congress would want a return on its investment and the American people would be outraged if they found out that the Truman administration had the chance to defeat Japan decisively *and* save American lives but opted not to do so.⁴⁴ Failing to do everything in their power to win the war as quickly as possible seemed like a far greater wrong than using nuclear weapons in the summer of 1945.

Another group of seven scientists led by James Franck at the Metallurgical Laboratory at the University of Chicago disagreed with the Interim Committee as well and they outlined their remonstrations in the Franck Report which they submitted to the committee on June 11. The report argued that the atomic bomb should be considered in regard to the long-term consequences of nuclear weapons rather than its immediate military advantage in the war against Japan. Seeing as the U.S. was at war, the report proposed a technical, rather than a military demonstration, preparatory to outlawing nuclear weapons by international agreement. The report warned that an atomic attack on

⁴⁴ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 41–42.

Japan without warning could incur international wrath, launch a nuclear arms race, and prejudice the world against nuclear non-proliferation.⁴⁵

The scientists on the Franck Committee acknowledged that they were not experts on domestic or foreign policy but, since “the force of events” had made them “cognizant of a grave danger for the safety of this country as well as for the future of all the other nations, of which rest of mankind is unaware,” they felt it was their duty to speak out about the political problems of nuclear power. In their work on the Manhattan Project, the scientists had realized that “nuclear power is fraught with infinitely greater dangers than were all the inventions of the past,” and they all lived in fear of a “Pearl Harbor disaster” repeated and magnified a thousand times in every major city. The only protection against nuclear aggression, they argued, was international political organization. Indeed, the report noted that “Among all the arguments calling for an efficient international organization for peace, the existence of nuclear weapons is the most compelling one.”⁴⁶

Perhaps the United States could avoid nuclear destruction by keeping its discoveries classified or developing a deterrent preponderance of nuclear weapons, but the report argued that it was impossible to keep nuclear knowledge secret and that nuclear superiority would not save the nation from sudden attack. The temptation to strike first was so strong and the capability for retaliation so limited, that it might not be possible to deter aggression. “In no other type of warfare does the advantage lie so heavily with the aggressor,” the report noted.

The committee optimistically reasoned that the prospect of nuclear destruction was so abhorrent to everyone that all nations would concur with an agreement to prevent nuclear war. But

⁴⁵ Arthur H. Compton to Henry L. Stimson, 12 June 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 118-119; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 42

⁴⁶ The Franck Report, June 11, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

their report also admitted that the “lack of mutual *trust*” or a stubborn dedication to national sovereignty could stand in the way of an anti-nuclear agreement. The war with Japan also threatened to open Pandora’s nuclear box. The report doubted whether the atomic bomb would be sufficient to break Japan’s will or capacity to resist, especially since its major cities had already been turned to ashes, and the committee worried that the introduction of nuclear weapons in the war could “easily destroy all our chances of success” in concluding an international ban on them. The Soviet Union, neutral countries, and close allies would all be shocked and suspicious. The report explained, “It may be very difficult to persuade the world that a nation which was capable of secretly preparing and suddenly releasing a weapon as indiscriminate as the rocket bomb and a million times more destructive, is to be trusted in its proclaimed desire of having such weapons abolished by international agreement.”

The report determined then that “the military advantages and the saving of American lives achieved by the sudden use of atomic bombs against Japan may be outweighed by the ensuing loss of confidence and by a wave of horror and repulsion sweeping over the rest of the world and perhaps even dividing public opinion at home.” For the scientists, saving lives could justify the horrors of nuclear destruction although, once again, they did not appreciate the wave of outrage that would sweep the United States if Americans found out that the government could have saved their boys but chose not to.

Considering the use of the bomb to be the greater evil though, the report recommended that the United States perform a non-military demonstration and exhibit the bomb’s tremendous power before the eyes of the world on a desert or barren island. In effect, the U.S. could transparently show its hand to the world and announce its readiness to renounce the use of nuclear weapons if other nations would join and agree to establish effective international controls. Only after a

demonstration, after sanction by the United Nations, and after delivering an ultimatum to Japan warning them to surrender or evacuate, might the bomb be used. “This may sound fantastic, but in nuclear weapons we have something entirely new in order of magnitude of destructive power, and if we want to capitalize fully on the advantage their possession gives us, we must use new and imaginative methods,” the report declared. In essence, the report recommended that the atomic bomb be used only as a last resort.

But even if the possibility of international control of nuclear weapons was impossible, as pessimists alleged, the report determined that the atomic bomb still should not be used against Japan, independently of humanitarian considerations. Using the bomb against Japan would mean “a flying start toward an unlimited armaments race,” the scientists declared and, if the race was inevitable, “we have every reason to delay its beginning as long as possible in order to increase our head start still further.” Franck and his fellow scientists thus seemed more concerned with winning the eventual nuclear arms race than winning the current war with Japan. The report continued:

The benefit to the nation, and the saving of American lives in the future, achieved by renouncing an early demonstration of nuclear bombs and letting the other nations come into the race only reluctantly, on the basis of guesswork and without definite knowledge that the ‘thing does work,’ may far outweigh the advantages to be gained by the immediate use of the first and comparatively inefficient bombs in the war against Japan.

The report further acknowledged Byrnes’ argument that so much money, manpower, and resources had been spent on the Manhattan Project that the American people might demand a return on their investment. But the committee believed that the public could easily understand the reasons for reserving a weapon only for “extreme emergency” and maintained that “as soon as the potentialities of nuclear weapons are revealed to the American people, one can be sure that they will support all attempts to make the use of such weapons impossible.” The committee apparently did not consider the final defeat of Japan an “emergency,” but nearly every official at the White House and the Pentagon did which suggests that the scientists were reasonably uninformed about the

military situation in Asia and the Pacific. The committee also seems not to have contemplated that public opinion might see things differently – that the American people would not stand for the deaths of thousands of American soldiers when their lives could have been saved.

It might seem odd that the people who developed the “secret weapon” should be reluctant to use it, the scientists admitted, but the committee maintained that the entire impetus for the Manhattan Project in the first place was “our fear that Germany had the technical skill necessary to develop such a weapon, and that the German government had no moral restraints regarding its use.” The United States, they apparently hoped, would have the ethical and humanitarian conscience to not use the bomb.

Overall, therefore, the report determined that unless the world could establish effective control of nuclear weapons, a nuclear arms race was inevitable, and the U.S. would be at a disadvantage in a world of nuclear proliferation because of the concentration of its population and industries in major metropolitan districts. Those considerations also made an atomic attack against Japan inadvisable. “If the United States were to be the first to release this new means of indiscriminate destruction upon mankind, she would sacrifice public support throughout the world, precipitate the race for armaments, and prejudice the possibility of reaching an international agreement on the future control of such weapons.” It would be far better for the United States to demonstrate the bomb’s power on an uninhabited area and, given the political problems posed by the atomic advent, the report recommended that the highest leaders of the nation, not military tacticians, should decide the bomb’s use. The report concluded, “we urge that the use of nuclear bombs in this war be considered as a problem of long-range national policy rather than of military

expediency, and that this policy be directed primarily to the achievement of an agreement permitting an effective international control of the means of nuclear warfare.”⁴⁷

In response to these moral critiques and petitions, the Interim Committee appointed a Scientific Panel to analyze technical and policy questions and examine the concerns of dissenting scientists and strategists. Both the committee and the panel studied the Franck Report and the memorandum from Ralph Bard but, on June 16, the panel likewise recommended that the United States proceed with its plans to use the atomic bomb against Japan. Comprised of J. Robert Oppenheimer, Ernest O. Lawrence, Arthur H. Compton, and Enrico Fermi, the panel recognized their “obligation to our nation to use the weapons to help save American lives in the Japanese war” and determined that the U.S. should use the bomb to win the war.

The panel acknowledged that the scientists on the Manhattan Project did not all agree on the use of nuclear weapons and opinions varied widely. Some wanted “a purely technical demonstration” while others supported “the military application best designed to induce surrender.” The chief difference between one view and another on the spectrum of nuclear use was moral values. Scientists who favored a demonstration wanted to outlaw nuclear weapons altogether, believing the bomb itself to be immoral and unsuitable for use by civilized nations. Others thought the U.S. could save American lives by using the bomb immediately and they believed that winning the current war and preventing future wars was more important than halting the use of nuclear weapons. For atomic advocates, it was war itself that was immoral, more than the means used to prosecute it. As Oppenheimer reported, “they are more concerned with the prevention of war than with the elimination of this specific weapon.” For their part, the Scientific Panel favored the bomb’s use: “we can propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no

⁴⁷ The Franck Report, June 11, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

acceptable alternative to direct military use,” the scientists testified.⁴⁸ Given the chance to achieve total victory *and* save American lives, the panel saw more value in using the bomb than in withholding it.

The panel also ignored broader issues about how the United States should continue to develop or deploy nuclear power. Unlike the Franck Report, the panel did not make any recommendations about the future of nuclear energy and abstained from discussions of political or moral problems. “It is true that we are among the few citizens who have had occasion to give thoughtful consideration to these problems during the past few years,” the panel concluded, “We have, however, no claim to special competence in solving the political, social, and military problems which are presented by the advent of atomic power.”⁴⁹

Arthur Compton also pointed out to Stimson separately that the Franck Report did not mention two important considerations. First, the report focused so much on long-term consequences that it overlooked the short-term consequences and military expediency of the bomb. Compton stated that the “failure to make a military demonstration of the new bombs may make the war longer and more expensive of human lives.” Second, the report did not explain how a technical demonstration would convince the world of the necessity of an international agreement prohibiting nuclear weapons. Compton explained, “without a military demonstration it may be impossible to impress the world with the need for national sacrifices in order to gain lasting security.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ J. Robert Oppenheimer to Henry L. Stimson, June 16, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL; Notes of Meeting of the Interim Committee, June 1, 1945; Log of the Interim Committee of the Manhattan Project, May 9, 1945; Tentative chronology of part played by scientists in decision to use the bomb against Japan, May 29, 1957; Diary Entries, June 1, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Subject File, HSTP, HSTPL.

⁴⁹ J. Robert Oppenheimer to Henry L. Stimson, June 16, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

⁵⁰ Arthur H. Compton to Henry L. Stimson, 12 June 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [2 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

With the evaluation of the Scientific Panel in hand as well as its own assessment, the Interim Committee remained convinced that a non-military demonstration would not work and that the best thing the United States could do with the atomic bomb was use it against Japan. The committee members hoped that the bomb's tremendous power would compel Tokyo to surrender without having to sacrifice so many American lives in an invasion. Having thus failed to persuade Oppenheimer and the Interim Committee, therefore, the Franck Report never reached policymaking leaders.⁵¹

HOLY TRINITY

The arguments for and against using the bomb became much stronger after the United States tested an atomic bomb for the first time. After years of research and development, the Manhattan Project finally produced a bomb, and the United States successfully tested the world's first atomic weapon in Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945. The Trinity test, according to Henry Stimson, demonstrated that "the power of the bomb measured up to our highest estimates."⁵²

The test was a smashing success, but even optimistic scientists did not fully anticipate the bomb's incredible power. In his report to the president on July 18, General Groves wrote, "For the first time in history there was a nuclear explosion. And what an explosion! ... The test was successful beyond the most optimistic expectations of anyone." Trinity released the explosive energy of 20,000 tons of TNT. The light from the explosion was seen 180 miles away, the sound was heard 100 miles away and the bomb created a crater 1,200 feet in diameter and six feet deep. The steel tower containing the bomb simply evaporated. Based on the bomb's effects, Groves indicated that unshielded steel and masonry buildings would also be destroyed by the bomb, and he no longer

⁵¹ Tentative chronology of part played by scientists in decision to use the bomb against Japan, May 29, 1957; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Subject File, HSTP, HSTPL.

⁵² Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 625.

considered the Pentagon safe from such a weapon.⁵³ Everyone was blown away by the experience and the earth-shaking forces they had unleashed. J. Robert Oppenheimer later remembered that a line from the *Bhagavad Gita* entered his mind at the time of the explosion, “Now I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds.” Groves told Truman that even the “uninitiated” felt “profound awe” while Brig. Gen. Thomas F. Farrell tried give words to the breathtaking experience:⁵⁴

The effects could well be called unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying. No man-made phenomenon of such tremendous power had ever occurred before. The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined. It was that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately. Thirty seconds after the explosion came first, the air blast pressing hard against the people and things, to be followed almost immediately by the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to The Almighty. Words are inadequate tools for the job of acquainting those not present with the physical, mental and psychological effects. It had to be witnessed to be realized.⁵⁵

Other onlookers made similar observations. Everyone who witnessed the event described it as a profound, quasi-spiritual experience. After the reality of the bomb subsided sufficiently, all of the project members felt a tremendous wave of relief that their efforts and research were not in vain.⁵⁶

For the President, the immediate and detailed reports test results solidified his thinking and attitudes about the bomb. The evening before the Potsdam Conference began, Truman heard a brief description of the test results from Stimson which confirmed his prior determination about the bomb. Knowing now that the bomb not only worked but equaled or surpassed everyone’s expectations, Truman felt freed from having to decide what to do if the bombs had not worked.

⁵³ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1305; Leslie R. Groves to Henry Stimson, July 18, 1945; *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb*, Research Material, HSTP, HSTPL.

⁵⁴ Harry S. Truman and Robert H. Ferrell, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman*, 1st ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 55; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 64.

⁵⁵ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1305

⁵⁶ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 63–64.

Now the decision was made for him. On June 21, the President received the first detailed report from General Groves and felt extremely gratified by the test results. On July 25, he wrote in his diary, “We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark.” Even though the atomic forces unleashed by the Trinity test seemed to defy human control, Truman felt grateful that Hitler or Stalin had not developed the bomb. He believed the United States, in contrast, could be trusted to use the new weapon appropriately and responsibly. “It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered,” he wrote in his diary, “but it can be made the most useful.”⁵⁷ He hoped the bomb could end the war quickly (perhaps before a Soviet invasion), but he did not want to put all his faith in the new gadget. For Truman, the bomb was still just part of the overall strategy to employ all possible force to compel Japan’s unconditional surrender.⁵⁸

Once Truman and his advisors knew the bomb worked, everyone’s thoughts turned again to using the bomb against Japan, and U.S. strategists seemed more convinced than ever that the bomb should be used to defeat Japan, achieve total victory, and save American lives. Stimson wrote that “We had developed a weapon of such revolutionary character that its use against the enemy might well be expected to produce exactly the kind of shock on the Japanese ruling oligarchy which we desired, strengthening the position of those who wished peace, and weakening that of the military party.”⁵⁹ General Thomas F. Farrell explained, “there was a feeling that no matter what else might happen, we now had the means to insure [the war’s] speedy conclusion and save thousands of American lives.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Truman and Farrell, *Off the Record*, 55–56.

⁵⁸ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 64, 66; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 57.

⁵⁹ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 625.

⁶⁰ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1305; see also *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939-30 June 1945*, 182.

Stimson was so impressed by the reports from New Mexico that when he briefed Byrnes the day after the test, he tried to persuade the Secretary of State that the U.S. should alter its plans in light of the bomb's power. The Secretary of War argued that a formidable warning about the bomb and a firm assurance that the Japanese could retain the emperor could bring about their capitulation, but Byrnes rejected both of Stimson's ideas. He interpreted Stimson's proposal as a retreat from unconditional surrender which, he felt, could be interpreted as a sign of weakness that would encourage Japan to hold out for a more favorable peace settlement and lead to public criticisms in the U.S. And, by not taking advantage of every measure that might end the war at the earliest moment, the President could leave himself vulnerable to future criticisms.⁶¹

The Trinity test thus led Stimson and Byrnes to opposite conclusions. Stimson thought the bomb would enhance the carrot and stick that he had proposed to Truman and he reasoned that the added threat of nuclear destruction could force Tokyo to finally surrender. Byrnes agreed that the atomic ace strengthened the U.S. hand but, for that very reason, he felt that United States should push its luck for total victory and take advantage of the bomb to make Japan fold. Byrnes was also more susceptible to public opinion, and he believed that Americans wanted the administration to use every possible means to win the war and save American lives. Armed with the atomic bomb, therefore, Byrnes thought the United States could now maintain its surrender terms *and* decisively end the war at less cost. Win-win.⁶²

The disagreement between Stimson and Byrnes was replicated on a larger scale among strategists and scientists. Just as the Trinity test further convinced U.S. strategists of the value and necessity of the atomic bomb, the test added proof for the project's scientists that the bomb was immoral and should not be used. Leo Szilard, the Manhattan Project's chief physicist, who had been

⁶¹ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 64–65.

⁶² Miscamble, 65.

rebuffed by Byrnes in South Carolina, remained undeterred and unwavering in his opposition to the bomb and he began to circulate a petition in Chicago requesting that the bomb not be used. He encouraged other scientists on the project to do the same at other project sites while counter-petitions supporting the use of the bomb circulated at Chicago and Oak Ridge in Tennessee.⁶³

On July 17, the day after the Trinity test, Szilard presented a petition signed by seventy members of the Manhattan Project, urging President Truman not to use the atomic bomb. The undersigned scientists included both men and women from research assistant Mary Burke and junior physicist Norman Goldstein to consultant William F. H. Zachariasen and senior engineer Leo Arthur Ohlinger. Like the mythological Prometheus, who brought forbidden fire to the human race, or Pandora, who unintentionally released evils and curses upon the world, the atomic scientists saw their work as a “new means of destruction.”⁶⁴ The atomic bombs, they believed, “represent only the first step in this direction, and there is almost no limit to the destructive power which will become available in the course of their future development.” As the nation that first developed and used “these newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction,” the United States would “bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.” The Szilard Petition therefore called for a new moral imperative to govern the awesome power of atomic energy in the new atomic age.⁶⁵

The scientists recognized that the war needed to be brought to a swift and successful conclusion and they knew that the bombs might very well win the war, but they did not feel that ends or goals like victory, however worthy, automatically justified the use of the bombs. It was not

⁶³ Tentative chronology of part played by scientists in decision to use the bomb against Japan, May 29, 1957; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Subject File, HSTP, HSTPL.

⁶⁴ Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

⁶⁵ Petition to the President of the United States, July 17, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Other Files, HSTP, HSTPL.

that victory was not good or moral enough to justify the bombs. It was that no matter how virtuous the ends or objectives, they were insufficient by themselves to justify the means of atomic destruction. Thus, the scientists did not outlaw the bomb outright because they recognized that such means could effectively end the war. Nevertheless, they remained unwilling to advocate the bomb's use simply to achieve that end because ending the war, successfully, quickly, or cheaply did not fulfill the bomb's high moral requirements. To break the moral glass and use the atomic bomb required an emergency or exigency, not expediency.

Szilard and his co-signers did justify the invention, development, and deployment of atomic weapons as defense, deterrent, or retaliation. As long as Germany was developing atomic weapons, the United States could rightly respond with the same in order to protect Americans. President Roosevelt used the same reasoning to develop and use chemical weapons.⁶⁶ Indeed, faced with the threat of atomic attacks by the Axis, the seventy scientists believed that the United States might only be saved or defended through atomic counterattacks. The defeat of Germany, however, defeated the threat of, and therefore the need for, the atomic bomb.

Clearly, the dissenting scientists had no quarrel with the moral principle of *lex talionis* – the law of retaliation that imposed an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth – and they felt morally secure developing and using atomic weapons as long as Germany was developing and threatening to use them too. In the Pacific War, a Japanese eye for an American eye would have been a similarly valid ethical exchange, except in the case of the atomic bombs. While many Americans regarded the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, the Bataan Death March, and other Japanese war crimes or atrocities as invitations or warrants for an American response, the seventy scientists from the Manhattan Project were so awed by the colossal power of atomic energy that they considered atomic attacks

⁶⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Statement Warning the Axis Against Using Poison Gas," June 8, 1943, APP.

excessive, even in a brutal war of annihilation against Japan. What was at stake for Szilard and the other scientists was not the law of retaliation, but the underlying principle of proportionality which they believed was entirely overthrown by the unprecedented power of nuclear weapons. Despite all the destruction or atrocities in Asia and the Pacific, nothing Japan had done in the war seemed to warrant such a destructive attack. Only after issuing a fair warning, after making the terms of surrender clear and public, after giving Japan every possible opportunity to surrender, and only after Japan had ignored and refused every opportunity to surrender, would the United States be justified in resorting to an atomic attack, and then only in “certain circumstances.”⁶⁷

In short, the atomic scientists were not moral absolutists or pacifists; they did not believe that nuclear weapons should never be used, but neither did they believe that nuclear weapons should be used with impunity whenever it suited the will or whim of the United States. In this case, the scientists considered the bomb an evil necessity and they wanted Truman to use it because he had no other, better, choice and the United States would “find itself forced to resort to the use of atomic bombs” because there was no other way to induce surrender short of expending thousands of American and/or Japanese lives. Thus, in view of this new power and paradigm, the undersigned scientists respectfully pleaded with Truman to exercise his power as commander-in-chief to control the atomic bomb and only use it in the face of continued Japanese obstinacy and in light of the moral responsibilities which the scientists outlined in their petition.⁶⁸ The tensions the scientists felt between the need to win the war and the costs of using the bombs to win thus led them to outline a new moral paradigm.

⁶⁷ Petition to the President of the United States, July 17, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Other Files, HSTP, HSTPL.

⁶⁸ Petition to the President of the United States, July 17, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Other Files, HSTP, HSTPL.

To a degree, Truman and his advisors agreed. At this point in the war against Japan, the United States was employing its means of last resort and U.S. strategists felt they had no better choice than to use the bombs. All other previous attempts to defeat Japan and force its unconditional surrender had not yet achieved total victory and so U.S. strategists believed there was no other way to win the war except by exacting and enduring thousands of casualties. If the atomic bomb, however, could somehow preclude or lessen the costs of invasion and still compel Japan's capitulation – or even if the bomb could simply help win the war without saving any lives, U.S. strategists could not imagine a more moral justification for its use.

War Without Cost

After the Trinity Test proved the effectiveness of the atomic bomb, U.S. strategists began preparing to use it against Japan. At the Potsdam Conference in July, President Truman, his advisors, and various staff crafted an ultimatum that demanded Japan's unconditional surrender and threatened Japan with total annihilation if Tokyo did not capitulate. However, Tokyo ignored the Potsdam Proclamation, which U.S. strategists believed absolved them of further bloodshed.

Since the Allies' warning had been rejected, Truman authorized the Air Force to use the atomic bomb as soon as it was ready. The United States could have bombed Kyoto to maximize the bomb's psychological impact, but Stimson convinced Truman not to attack Japan's ancient capital out of humanitarian concerns and the U.S. instead bombed Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The atomic bomb completely obliterated the city, but Truman justified the attack by claiming that Hiroshima was a military base. The Soviet Union declared war on Japan two days later while U.S. aircraft continued to pound Japanese cities while Tokyo's Supreme Council deliberated about the Allies' surrender terms. Japan still had not surrendered on August 9, when the United States dropped a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, destroying that city as well.

Truman faced criticisms from prominent leaders who argued that U.S. strategies had not gone far enough and others who alleged that the U.S. had gone too far. Truman acknowledged the need to punish and defeat Japan but also expressed humanitarian sympathies for the Japanese people. His justifications of the atomic bomb showed that the President's primary concern was to achieve total victory, but he struggled to understand how the United States could defeat its enemies without turning into them.

In Tokyo, Emperor Hirohito broke the government's stalemate and determined to surrender according to the Potsdam Proclamation, provided that his own position was guaranteed. After further discussions at the White House, Truman and his advisors decided to refuse Japan's conditional offer and insisted on unconditional surrender but implicitly agreed to keep the emperor if he subjected his authority to the Allies. Despite some last-minute attempts to continue Japanese resistance, Hirohito and the other Japanese leaders accepted the U.S. stipulations on August 14 and surrendered unconditionally to the Allies on September 2, ending the Second World War.

The atomic bombs and the defeat of Japan remain the most controversial issue in American history, but a historical consensus indicates that President Truman used the atomic bombs to win the war as soon as possible and save American lives. While recent scholarship indicates that it was the dual combination of the atomic bombs *and* the Soviet declaration of war that ultimately forced Japan to surrender, U.S. strategists largely believed that the atomic bombs had won the war on their own. I argue that the United States finally defeated Japan because U.S. strategists were willing to pursue total victory at all costs and waged an unlimited war in order to compel Japan's unconditional surrender. The atomic bombs eventually convinced Emperor Hirohito to surrender because the silver bullets completely overturned Japan's mortal calculus for the war and showed that the United States could exact an intolerable level of devastation without enduring any reciprocal casualties. President Truman and Henry Stimson, in particular, wrestled with the moral dilemmas of the atomic bombs but finally determined that total victory justified unlimited war. Victory at all costs was therefore not only America's strategy for winning World War II but its moral justification for doing so.

THE POTSDAM CONFERENCE

As U.S. strategists continued to debate the merits and meaning of unconditional surrender, how best to defeat Japan, and the use of the atomic bomb, President Truman traveled to Potsdam, in the Soviet occupation zone of Germany. There, on July 17, 1945, he met Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin for the first time and discussed the issues of winning the war with the Allies, although Churchill was soon replaced by Clement Atlee after the general British election.

The Potsdam Conference “reaffirmed every principle of conservative planning for the defeat of Japan.” The Allies reemphasized their intent to attack Japan’s will to resist by every means possible, the Combined Chiefs of Staff reported their final program for invasion, planned for the end of organized Japanese resistance by November 15, 1946, and issued an ultimatum “as a calculated effort to lower the Japanese will to resist.”¹

At the conference, the Allied leaders and their staff discussed the declaration draft from the Committee of Three at length. The most important issue was whether Japan should be permitted to retain the Mikado. Henry Stimson, George Marshall, James Forrestal, William Leahy, and Joseph Grew argued that the emperor should be allowed to keep his throne because he was the only authority who could convince Japanese soldiers to lay down their arms and the United States would need some kind of stabilizing presence during the occupation. British officials like Sir Alan Brooke also advocated finding a way for unconditional surrender to coexist with the Japanese Mikado.² The more politically-minded James Byrnes argued against retaining Hirohito, however, in order to win domestic political points. To many Americans, the emperor was a war criminal who stood at the

¹ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1381; Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

² *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, unnumbered document following Doc. 710, #3.

head of Japan's military caste and was just as guilty as any Japanese general. In their minds, failing to punish Hirohito was not all that different from pardoning Hitler.

Truman and Churchill also talked about the costs of unconditional surrender over lunch on July 18. While reaffirming Britain's commitment to support the United States and defeat Japan, Churchill concentrated on the American and British casualties necessary to force Japan's unconditional surrender and wondered whether the termination of the war might be expressed another way. Could the Allies come up with a compromise that would assure future peace and security, but also assure Japan of a future national existence and leave them some way of saving their military honor? Truman reportedly retorted that the Japanese had no military honor after Pearl Harbor, but Churchill pointed out that the Japanese had enough honor to sacrifice themselves for something which, while unimportant to the Allies, was obviously existential for the Japanese. According to Churchill, Truman suddenly expressed great sympathy and talked of "the terrible responsibilities that rested upon him in regard to the unlimited effusion of American blood."³

After further discussions Truman's advisors also inserted some last-minute adjustments to the proclamation draft.⁴ On July 18, Admiral Leahy wrote to Truman on behalf of the Joint Chiefs and recommended amending the proclamation's statement about a Japanese constitutional monarchy. Instead, the JCS wanted to state that "the Japanese people would be free to choose their own form of government." The JCS also advised the President not to make any statement or take any action at that time that would make it difficult to use the emperor's authority to order the surrender of Japanese soldiers in Japan and the surrounding areas.⁵

³ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, unnumbered document following Doc. 710, #14.

⁴ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1244.

⁵ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1239.

Secretary Stimson also recommended changing a phrase about unconditional surrender. Instead of promising to fight Japan “until her unconditional capitulation,” he suggested saying the Allies would wage war “until she ceases to resist.” By changing the wording, the proclamation avoided an unnecessary repetition of “unconditional surrender” and made Japan’s actions more recognizable and feasible. The change also avoided “a perplexing contradiction in terms.” Stimson elaborated that “A capitulation is defined in the only dictionary I have at hand as ‘a conditional surrender; a treaty’. To call in substance, for an unconditional conditional surrender would be highly confusing and, as translated, possibly badly, into Japanese, the expression might well defeat our ends. The words I suggest avoid this difficulty.”⁶ Stimson’s suggestions did not change the policy in any way, but the secretary wanted to make sure that the Allies elucidated precisely what unconditional surrender meant and that there would be no misunderstanding that Japan would receive no conditions.

Meanwhile, the debate over unconditional surrender continued stateside. In Congress, Senator Burton K. Wheeler (D-MT) claimed that more Americans were demanding a definition of American terms and that the failure to do so was unnecessarily prolonging the war and costing more American lives. Senator Warren G. Magnuson (D-WA) then took the floor and argued just the opposite, claiming that any slackening by the Allies would prolong the war and that the quickest way to defeat Japan was to “say that unconditional surrender means just that.”⁷ Everyone clearly wanted to win the war, but the country disagreed about whether unconditional surrender was making U.S. goals easier or harder.

Publicly, domestic rumors suggested that the Truman administration was preparing to issue a statement clarifying its surrender terms but Joseph Grew reaffirmed the government’s policy of

⁶ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1241.

⁷ “Magnuson in Senate Urges Stern Terms,” *NYT*, July 25, 1945.

unconditional surrender. In a telegram to James Byrnes on July 19, Grew explained that the American press thought that the Potsdam Conference would produce some kind of Allied statement on surrender and one rumor speculated that the adjusted terms would include an American pledge not to invade Japan. Earlier that day, the Associated Press and International News Services had asked if the Truman administration had formulated a policy about unconditional surrender for the president to take to Potsdam and whether the U.S. had “any unilateral definition of unconditional surrender for Japan.”⁸

Grew told the press that the U.S. government had repeatedly stated its policy on unconditional surrender, that President Truman himself had elucidated the policy in his speech on V-E Day and his speech to Congress on June 1, and that the administration had no plans to alter the policy. Grew explained, however, that the implementation of unconditional surrender would depend on the developing military and political situation with Japan and that the treatment of the Japanese would depend upon the circumstances under which surrender took place. If Japan surrendered forthwith, before an Allied invasion, then the Japanese would be treated differently than if they delayed or failed to surrender. “The longer the period of the fighting, and the greater the loss of American lives,” Grew explained, the more severe would be the treatment of the Japanese:

the longer Japan resists the more certainly shall we know that the military war lords are still in firm control and the more drastic will be the measures required to rout them out and to insure their complete permanent downfall and elimination. We have declared our firm purpose to eliminate the forces in Japan which have made it a threat to the peace of the world, and that purpose we mean to carry out.

Grew therefore explained that, in order to destroy Japanese militarism, the United States would have to occupy Japan and, “In the light of the sacrifices already made by the United Nations, it is unthinkable that we should pause or be deflected from the full attainment of our objectives.”⁹

⁸ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1240.

⁹ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1240.

Although the reassertion of unconditional surrender was not new, Grew's justification was. Others had argued that unconditional surrender inadvertently prolonged the war, and they advocated clarifying or modifying the policy in order to save American lives but Grew suggested that unconditional surrender justified American bloodshed. After all the sacrifices and suffering that the Allies had endured in the war, it would be profane for the United States to now move the goalposts and settle for anything less than total victory.

The administration's persistence on unconditional surrender sparked more fireworks with Captain Zacharias who interpreted Japanese overtures as signs that his psychological campaign was working and that more unlimited war was unnecessary. Truman rejected Zacharias' leniency, however, and reminded the captain that he was a spokesman for U.S. policy, not an executor or policy maker, and the President ordered his presumptive messenger to stick to the script and read his lines, not read in between or into them. Whatever his personal convictions, Zacharias was directed not to repeat the assertion that the emperor would be kept in his broadcasts. The Truman administration still disagreed about the status and future of the emperor and when or whether to offer such an overture.

Overruled but undaunted, Zacharias remained convinced that Japan was ready to surrender and that his psychological campaign was slowly changing the minds and hearts of Japanese leaders. Despite Truman's orders, he wrote an anonymous letter to Premier Suzuki in the *Washington Post* on July 21 and tried to clarify unconditional surrender himself. "Unconditional surrender is the manner in which the war is terminated," he wrote. "It means exactly what General Grant had in mind when he stated his terms to General Lee, namely, the acceptance of terms without qualifying counter-arguments." Zacharias also cited previous Allied statements to indicate how the war would end. The Atlantic Charter and Cairo Declaration proved that the United States did not seek any territory while American military law, based on historical precedents and Supreme Court decisions, stipulated that

the conquest or occupation of another state did not affect the sovereignty of the defeated nation, even if that nation were under complete military control. In effect, Zacharias tried to tell the Japanese that they did not need to fear unconditional surrender since the term referred only to the manner in which hostilities were to be concluded rather than the final fate of the Japanese nation. If the Japanese sought further clarification, Zacharias suggested that they use regular diplomatic channels and formally request that the Truman administration clarify its intentions about the emperor. As an official spokesman, Zacharias issued Broadcast No. 12 on that same day and suggested that Japan could surrender unconditionally according to the principles of the Atlantic Charter which would not only provide Japan with “peace with honor,” but would preserve the Japanese empire and its imperial institutions, including the emperor.¹⁰

The *Washington Post* letter received much more attention than Zacharias anticipated. A response from Dr. Kiyoshi Inouye on July 24 led him to believe that the Japanese would end the war right away.¹¹ But when they did not, Zacharias was baffled and he could not explain why the Japanese did not surrender until after the Potsdam Proclamation, the atomic bombs, and Soviet intervention. Meanwhile, some officials felt that broadcast twelve exhibited a weakening of American will and that Japan would do just the opposite of what Zacharias wanted – they would keep fighting and hold out for better terms.¹² The letter and the broadcast also defied the President’s orders and undermined the administration’s other attempts to win the war and the Navy promptly stripped Zacharias of his “official spokesman” title and reassigned him to the Office of War Information within a week. Neither the military nor the Truman administration forbade him from

¹⁰ Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 370–71, 377. David A. Pfeiffer, “Sage Prophet or Loose Cannon?”; *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference)*, 1945, vol. II, no. 1243.

¹¹ Zacharias, 373–74.

¹² Zacharias, 382–83.

delivering further broadcasts though, and Zacharias issued two final broadcasts, two days after the Potsdam Proclamation and two days before the first atomic bomb.¹³

The Potsdam Proclamation

After nearly ten days of meetings, U.S. officials and their allies prepared to issue a final ultimatum to the Japanese in the form of the Potsdam Proclamation. In his memoirs, Truman explained that he wanted to demonstrate Allied unity, purpose, and resolve. Having received Japanese communiques which desperately tried to drive a wedge between the western democracies and the Soviet Union, Truman hoped that another Allied declaration would show Japan's leaders that any chance of a negotiated peace was hopeless, and that unconditional surrender was Japan's only shot to avoid total annihilation. Stimson still wanted to modify the surrender terms to allow the emperor to remain on the throne, but Truman and Byrnes stuck to unconditional surrender and received Churchill's support.¹⁴ Now that the effectiveness of the atomic bomb had been proven, the President also wanted to give Japan a "clear chance" to end the war on American terms before the U.S. deployed the bomb.¹⁵ The Potsdam Proclamation, therefore, was the last warning and last chance for Japan to surrender.

On July 26, 1945, the United States, Great Britain, and China issued their joint declaration. In forceful and unmistakably clear language, the Allies agreed that "Japan shall be given an opportunity to end this war." They announced that Allied forces were "poised to strike the final blows upon Japan" and that the Allied nations were determined "to prosecute the war against Japan until she ceases to resist." The Allies had already defeated Germany and warned that "The full application of our military power, backed by our resolve, *will* mean the inevitable and complete

¹³ David A. Pfeiffer, "Sage Prophet or Loose Cannon?"

¹⁴ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 69.

¹⁵ Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:417.

destruction of the Japanese armed forces and just as inevitably the utter devastation of the Japanese homeland.” Faced with certain defeat, the Japanese had to decide whether they would continue to follow the militarists who had “brought the Empire of Japan to the threshold of annihilation” or whether they would take “the path of reason.”¹⁶

The proclamation then outlined the surrender terms for Japan and pledged “We will not deviate from them. There are no alternatives. We shall brook no delay.” From Potsdam, the Allies called for an end to Japanese militarism and, until Japan’s capacity to make war had been destroyed, the Allies would occupy parts of Japanese territory to ensure a “new order of peace, security and justice.” The Cairo Declaration would be enforced, and the Allies would limit Japanese sovereignty to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku, and other minor islands. The Allies did not intend to enslave or destroy the Japanese nation, however, and would permit Japanese forces to return to their homes after being disarmed “to lead peaceful and productive lives” although the Allies nevertheless promised to administer “stern justice” to all war criminals. The Allies also planned to democratize Japan by establishing freedoms of speech, religion, and thought, in addition to fundamental human rights. Japan would be allowed to retain peaceful economic industries and eventually participate in world trade again. Once Allied objectives had been fulfilled, their forces would withdraw. Truman, Churchill, and Chiang then concluded with an ultimatum: “We call upon the Government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all the Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.”¹⁷

¹⁶ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1382

¹⁷ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1382; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 69-70; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 68-69.

The Potsdam Proclamation was presented to the American press through the OWI, White House, and State Department on the afternoon of July 27 and then was broadcast to Japan later that day and repeated at regular intervals for several following days.¹⁸ Many Americans later assumed that the proclamation had guaranteed immunity to Emperor Hirohito, but it clearly “promised immunity to no one” and called on Japan to surrender unconditionally.¹⁹ After all of the discussions and controversy about the Casablanca Doctrine, the United States ultimately remained devoted to the policy showing, once again, that total victory was the supreme objective and consideration of the war. Truman, however, regarded the proclamation as a compromise because, while it insisted on unconditional surrender, it made the emperor’s status negotiable.²⁰ Stimson felt pleased with the proclamation though because it had provided Japan with both a warning stick and a hopeful carrot. The U.S. threatened Japan with destruction if Japanese forces continued to resist, but offered hope if Japan surrendered. The proclamation also solidified the Grand Alliance. It demonstrated that all of Japan’s enemies were united in defeating Japan and would pursue the war to the end, no matter the cost.²¹

The Japanese government answered the ultimatum two days later on July 28 when the Supreme Council issued its own statement which used the verb *mokusatsu* which could be translated as “ignore,” “take no notice of,” or “treat with silent contempt.”²² Under pressure from the military to completely reject the Allied proclamation, Premier Suzuki also gave a press conference that same day which offered no reason to think that the Japanese would consider accepting Allied terms. Suzuki claimed that the Japanese government did not see any importance in the Potsdam

¹⁸ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1255.

¹⁹ George M. Eley to Harry S. Truman, February 3, 1950; Eley, George, Box 101, Series 9 General File 1940-1953, PSF, HSTPL.

²⁰ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 180.

²¹ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 624–25.

²² Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 69.

Proclamation. He called it “nothing but a rehash of the Cairo Declaration” and said it was “unworthy of public notice.”²³ Indeed, “there is no other recourse but to ignore it entirely and resolutely fight for the successful conclusion of this war,” Suzuki declared.²⁴

U.S. intelligence had also decoded Japanese diplomatic cables through Magic (a codebreaking project, not supernatural powers) which allowed U.S. officials to eavesdrop on the exchanges between Japanese Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo and the Japanese Ambassador in Moscow, Naotake Sato.²⁵ Their conversations at the end of July revealed that “The Japanese sought not a surrender but rather a negotiated peace to preserve the imperial system, whatever the cost to their own people.”²⁶ Sato told the Soviets on July 30, for example, that he fully understood the circumstances that confronted Japan, but he repeated the official government line that unconditional surrender was “out of the question.” If there was a chance to avoid such terms, Japan was willing to end the war “with an extremely conciliatory attitude” as long as the Allies guaranteed Japan’s honor and existence.²⁷

The Truman administration could not have interpreted the Japanese response to mean anything other than a complete and contemptuous rejection of the Potsdam Proclamation, and a renewed determination to fight to the death.²⁸ For those who had insisted that Tokyo was ready and eager to surrender, tired of the war, and looking for an opportunity to end it, and that the United States should soften its terms and open a way for Japan to save face, Japan’s response presented a stunning reproof. The *New York Times* reported that Tokyo’s rejection of the Potsdam Proclamation “clears the air of any false hopes, held here and elsewhere, that Japan would yield and the war be

²³ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 625.

²⁴ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1258.

²⁵ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 64; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 45–46.

²⁶ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 65.

²⁷ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1261.

²⁸ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 70.

shortened if only the meaning of ‘unconditional surrender’ were clarified.’²⁹ Tokyo had not only refused to surrender on any terms, it had totally ignored and rejected the Allies’ warning. By silently but publicly dismissing the proclamation, Japan showed that it was still holding out for a conditional peace and planned to continue bleeding the United States into an acceptable settlement.

Japan’s response thus also validated strategists who assumed that Japan would never surrender and legitimated and justified the United States’ plans for unconditional surrender and unlimited war. U.S. strategists thought they had given it their best shot. They had clarified unconditional surrender, offered reasonable terms, and provided unmistakable warnings, to no avail. The *New York Times* considered the Allies’ terms “as fair and as generous as they could afford to be, considering Japan’s long record of brutal and treacherous aggression.” The Allies had no intention of making slaves or rubble of Japan, no plans to conquer and acquire the home islands, and promised a regime with human rights, an economy with industries, access to raw materials and world trade, with fair reparations. Japan would lose the territories it had conquered by force, its armed forces and war industries, of course, and Allied occupation would ensure compliance and the end of Japanese militarism but “These are the final and unalterable terms of the three Allied nations against whom the Japanese made unprovoked war.”³⁰

Since the Japanese government had no intention of surrendering on terms acceptable to the United States, the Truman administration moved forward with its plans to win the war.³¹ In that sense, the Potsdam ultimatum cut both ways. Once Japan rejected the proclamation – choosing, as it were, annihilation over surrender – the United States effectively had no choice but to follow through

²⁹ “The Ultimatum,” *NYT*, July 28, 1945.

³⁰ “The Ultimatum,” *NYT*, July 28, 1945.

³¹ Ellis Zacharias thought that the Truman administration should have given Japanese leaders more time to respond to the Potsdam Proclamation, but he seemed to disregard Premier Suzuki’s statement ignoring or tabling the ultimatum; see Zacharias, *Secret Missions*, 388.

on its ultimatum and proceed with unlimited war. Japan had rejected the terms of peace, so the war had to go on until the outcome was decided on the battlefield. Japan's response thus also sanctified America's final killing strokes. Since Tokyo had rebuffed their ultimatum, U.S. strategists believed that Japan had essentially absolved them of further bloodshed. Whatever casualties or costs the war incurred would be on the heads of Japanese leaders, not the United States. Japan's rejection of the Potsdam Proclamation enabled U.S. strategists to wash their hands of the war's blood.

HIROSHIMA & NAGASAKI

By rejecting the allied ultimatum, Japan also absolved President Truman and his advisors of any reconsideration of the atomic bomb. After proffering the proclamation, Truman did not call a meeting of his top advisers to review the bomb's use, he did not ask for position papers to explain the advantages and disadvantages of using the bomb, he did not request studies on the bomb's impact on Japan or its effect on the diplomatic or military position of the United States. What was there to discuss? Truman's primary objective and concern was to win the war – decisively, quickly, and at minimal human cost – and the bomb seemed to offer the best probability of accomplishing those goals. This does not mean that the bomb's use was inevitable. Truman could have decided not to use it, “But he had no compelling reason to do so,” J. Samuel Walker asserts.³²

Since Truman never reassessed the bomb's use, the President never issued a direct order to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. In fact, there is no single document which shows Truman's decision to use the bomb. There are scores of documents revealing the discussions about the development, use, and value of the bomb, and the bomb's deployment was absolutely intentional, but the actual decision to use the new weapon resulted less from an intentional, deliberate choice at

³² Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 58–59.

a single moment in time, and instead emerged from the organizational functions, discussions, assumptions, and ethics of the Truman administration during the summer of 1945.

The bomb still required orders for its use though, and the Army Air Forces received two military directives for using the bomb against Japanese cities which both resulted from informal discussions between General Groves and other Army officials in the last week of July. First, after the Interim Committee reported that the bomb would be ready to use at the first good opportunity in August, General Carl A. Spaatz, General Arnold's top lieutenant who commanded the strategic air forces in the Pacific, insisted on an official, formal order to drop the bomb and on July 24, Arnold received a directive to drop the bomb on Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata, or Nagasaki between August 1 and 10. The next day, Arnold received a second order from General Thomas T. Handy, the Acting Chief of Staff (with the approval of Marshall and Stimson), which called for the use of the first bomb as soon as the weather permitted after August 3.³³

Harry Truman therefore made what has become the most controversial decision in American history without any controversy, without any recognizable decision, and without any moral misgivings. As Wilson D. Miscamble has shown, the decision to drop the atomic bomb was not really much of a decision at all. The weapon had been inherited from Roosevelt and the grand objective for the war had always been to win at the lowest cost in American lives.³⁴ In fact, among the important decision makers who knew about the bomb and discussed its use – from the Interim Committee and the Target Committee to the Joint Chiefs and the President himself – there was no debate about whether to use the bomb, only how to use it. And, as Barton Bernstein has pointed out, there was never an actual decision meeting for the bomb because there was no need for one.

³³ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1309; Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:420-421; Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 181; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 59.

³⁴ Herring, *The American Century and Beyond, U.S. Foreign Relations, 1893-2015*, 292.

The American and British governments had confirmed that the atomic bomb would be used against Japan at a meeting of the Combined Policy Committee at the Pentagon on July 4, but General Groves suggested that Truman's only major decision was the one he made to not interfere with the process of developing and employing the bomb.³⁵ The demands for total victory that led to unconditional surrender and invasion and the desires for quick and less costly victories that led to island-hopping and firebombing culminated in the atomic bomb. American goals made the decision to use the bomb easy. Truman's problem was how to use the available means to maximum effect.³⁶

The only remaining decision was what target to hit. After the Target Committee identified its list of prospective cities, the JCS had sent a message to General MacArthur, Admiral Nimitz, and General Arnold ordering U.S. forces not to attack Kyoto, Hiroshima, Kokura, or Nagata under any circumstance, in order to retain an unproven ground for testing the new weapon.³⁷ By bombing a clean target, the United States could more dramatically demonstrate the full destructive power of the atomic bombs and shock the Japanese into surrender. Truman though, wanted to use the atomic bomb against a military target "in the manner prescribed by the laws of war."³⁸ As with strategic bombing and firebombing, therefore, military necessity put the atomic bombs at odds with moral concerns and U.S. strategists were caught between their determination to exact maximum destruction and their desires to maintain at least the semblance of morality.

In order to compel Japan's unconditional surrender, U.S. strategists aimed to make the atomic bomb as destructive as possible, and that would require civilian casualties. They calculated

³⁵ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. I, no. 619; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 45-46, 80.

³⁶ Hughes and Johnson, *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*, 56.

³⁷ *Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945*; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL; Curtis E. LeMay, "B-29 Campaign in the Pacific," undated, JAR.

³⁸ Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:420.

that the more destruction and death the bomb could inflict on Japan, the more devastating, shocking, and compelling the attack would be, and the more likely the Japanese government would be to surrender. This was part of the reason scientists, administration officials, and military commanders opposed warning Japan or conducting a non-military demonstration first. Their goal was not to avoid using the bombs or to diminish their impact, but to make the bombs as effective as possible. Even if the bomb had been intended to explicitly impress or threaten the Soviets, it would, of necessity, had to have killed as many Japanese as possible. Consequently, despite Truman's desire to adhere to the laws of war, none of the cities targeted for atomic annihilation were military bases.³⁹

The President genuinely wanted to use the atomic bomb in a legitimate moral way, and he thought that the United States would be justified in using such an awesome weapon by giving Japan fair warning and attacking a military target. Truman had written in his diary a day before issuing the Potsdam Proclamation, "The target will be a purely military one and we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives. I'm sure they will not do that, but we will have given them the chance."⁴⁰ Like the Interim Committee, however, the President deceived himself into thinking that the bomb's damage would somehow be limited to destroying military targets and he overlooked the fact that women and children had been targeted by conventional and incendiary bombs for months.

If the United States aimed to inflict as much damage as possible on Japan, Kyoto was the obvious target. General Groves favored attacking the ancient Japanese capital in order to exact the maximum psychological damage on the Japanese but Stimson talked with Truman on July 24 and pleaded that the Army Air Forces spare the city. Truman concurred with his Secretary of War that the bomb should be used against military personnel and installations, not civilians and women and

³⁹ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 59–60.

⁴⁰ Truman and Ferrell, *Off the Record*, 55.

children. He explained in his diary, “Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop this terrible bomb on the old capital or the new.”⁴¹ Stimson later wrote, “Although it was a target of considerable military importance, it had been the ancient capital of Japan and was a shrine of Japanese art and culture. We determined that it should be spared.” Stimson apparently felt that the bomb could accomplish all that it was intended to do without destroying Kyoto, which he and other strategists felt would be overkill. The bomb would do what they thought was necessary, and U.S. strategists did not consider it excessive. Thus, with the president’s approval, Stimson overrode Groves and crossed Kyoto off the list of targets leaving Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata, and Nagasaki.⁴² Together then, Truman and Stimson implicitly adjusted the atomic bomb’s goal. By refusing to bomb Kyoto, the atomic bomb no longer aimed at maximum, unlimited destruction. Rather, the bomb would accomplish sufficient destruction – the level of devastation necessary to force Japan’s unconditional surrender.

After Truman and Stimson passed over Kyoto, General Carl Spaatz selected Hiroshima of the four approved cities for the first atomic bomb. At the time, Hiroshima was Japan’s eighth largest city and U.S. strategists regarded as a “military base city” because of its army depot.⁴³ The city therefore fit Truman’s bill for military value and it allegedly contained no POW camps which was important because U.S. strategists wanted to make sure that no Americans would be killed by

⁴¹ Truman and Ferrell, 55–56.

⁴² Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 625; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 44, 70–71; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 59–60. Stimson had visited Japan several times during the 1920s when he was Governor-General of the Philippines and there has been some speculation that he even honeymooned in Kyoto. As poignant as that would be, however, there has never been any documentary evidence to suggest that he removed the city from the nuclear target list because of personal sentimental attachment.

⁴³ *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939-30 June 1945*, 182.

friendly fire even as they wanted to make sure that the bomb caused maximum devastation among the Japanese.⁴⁴

The assignment to drop the bomb fell to a special B-29 unit in LeMay's 509th Group. At 8:15 A.M. local time on August 6, 1945, the crew of the *Enola Gay*, commanded by Col. Paul Tibbets, dropped an atomic bomb named "Little Boy" on Hiroshima. The bomb detonated about 1,900 feet above the city and the explosion obliterated more than four square miles of the metropolis – sixty percent of the city's urban area.⁴⁵ Everyone within a radius of about half a mile was killed instantly by the blast and, farther away, Japanese were hit by an incredible flash of heat which created an enormous firestorm. Anyone who survived the immediate blast was blinded by the flash, burned by the heat, and struck by debris. The explosion melted skin and torched bodies and thousands died in later days from their injuries and the delayed effects of radiation. The Hiroshima bomb killed approximately 80,000 Japanese men, women, and children instantly and wounded an equal number.⁴⁶ In his diary, General LeMay stated that the early reports showed "incalculable" damage to Hiroshima; "Early estimates are that 50% of its population were killed by this single bomb, he wrote"⁴⁷

William Laurence, the *New York Times* science editor, was supposed to accompany the mission but he arrived in Tinian too late, so he asked Captain Robert A. Lewis to keep some notes about his experience onboard. Lewis logged the flight of the *Enola Gay* and then described the bombing. When Col. Tibbets turned the plane around so the crew could see the results, Lewis wrote "there in front of our eyes was without a doubt the greatest explosion man has ever witnessed." Like the Trinity Test, the experience of the atomic bomb elicited sober, spiritual reflections. Lewis noted,

⁴⁴ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 184.

⁴⁵ Curtis E. LeMay, "B-29 Campaign in the Pacific," undated, JAR.

⁴⁶ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 183; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 74–76, 94.

⁴⁷ Curtis E. LeMay Daily Diary, 1944-1945, JAR.

“I am certain the entire crew felt this experience was more than anyone human had ever thought possible. It just seems impossible to comprehend... If I live a hundred years I’ll never quite get these few minutes out of my mind.” Lewis could not help but think about conditions on the ground, however. “Just how many Japs did we kill?” he wondered. “I honestly have the feeling of groping for words to explain this or I might say my God what have we done.” Surely, the bomb had changed the war, though. After a few last looks on the scene, Lewis thought the Japanese might surrender before the crew landed at Tinian, “They certainly don’t care to have us drop anymore bombs of atomic energy like this,” he wrote.⁴⁸

As Truman steamed back across the Atlantic from the Potsdam Conference, he received notice that the bombing of Hiroshima had been successful. “Big bomb dropped on Hiroshima 5 August at 7:15 P.M. Washington time,” Stimson related. “First reports indicate complete success which was even more conspicuous than earlier test.”⁴⁹ The president was “greatly moved” by the news but could not hold back his ecstatic expectation that the Pacific War would soon end. He told the surrounding sailors on board, “This is the greatest thing in history.”⁵⁰

While the president was still at sea, the White House issued a stunning press release that announced the U.S. attack on Hiroshima and introduced the atomic bomb to the world. The statement announced:

Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base.⁵¹ That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of T. N. T. It had more

⁴⁸ Robert A. Lewis, *Bombing of Hiroshima*; Lewis, Robert – Notes Taken During Mission of the Enola Gay to Bomb Hiroshima, August 6, 1945, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

⁴⁹ Henry L. Stimson to Harry S. Truman, August 6, 1945; Atomic Bomb, Box 42, GMEP, HSTPL.

⁵⁰ Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:421–22.

⁵¹ The draft statement for the White House press release, which was written the previous week on July 30, omitted the phrase “an important Japanese Army base.” Instead, the draft simply stated that the atomic bomb had “destroyed [Hiroshima’s] usefulness to the enemy.” See Draft statement on the dropping of the bomb, July 30, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, PSF, HSTP, HSTPL.

than two thousand times the blast power of the British “Grand Slam” which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare.

The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet. With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces. In their present form these bombs are now in production and even more powerful forms are in development.

It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East...

We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city. We shall destroy their docks, their factories, and their communications. Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan’s power to make war.

It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth. Behind this air attack will follow sea and land forces in such numbers and power as they have not yet seen and with the fighting skill of which they are already well aware.⁵²

In its press release, the White House justified the attack on Hiroshima. Truman reminded Americans and his global audience that Japan had started the war. The Japanese had drawn their gun first when they attacked Pearl Harbor which made Americans perpetual victims and gave the United States righteous reason for everything they did in the war. Through their campaigns across the Pacific and the bombing of Japanese cities, the United States had repaid Japan for Pearl Harbor and other crimes. But American attacks served not only as retaliation but justice. By repaying Japan “many fold” Truman implicitly recognized that the devastation of Hiroshima and other Japanese cities exceeded the damage at Hawaii, but he looked past the disproportion because Americans believed Japan got what was coming to them. The President did not think the United States was completely cruel and vindictive, though. Truman noted that the Allies had issued a warning to save Japan from total ruin, but the Japanese government had rejected that ultimatum. No one could blame anyone

⁵² *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, no. 1315; *FRUS, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, vol. VI, no. 401; Press release by the White House, August 6, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Subject File, HSTP, HSTPL.

for Japan's suffering except the Japanese. Japan had sown the wind and now they reaped the whirlwind.

The press release also extolled American power. The United States had destroyed Hiroshima with a single bomb dropped by a solitary plane. The Americans had harnessed "the basic power of the universe" and unleashed it against Japan's warmakers. Truman also warned that the United States was developing even more powerful weapons but, even without them, the U.S. had the capability to eradicate every Japanese activity from the face of the earth. By showcasing American power, the White House revealed the futility of Japanese resistance. How could Japan possibly resist the power of the universe which the Americans had mobilized? What hope of survival could Japan cling to without any "productive enterprise"? Did the Japanese government have any choice but surrender?

If Japan did not surrender, the White House warned of further attacks and even greater devastation. No matter how strongly the Japanese resolved to continue the fight, the United States was prepared and willing to completely obliterate Japan's ability to make war. In a warning that still chills the bones today, the President vowed that if they did not now surrender, the Japanese could expect "a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth" followed by an invasion of the home islands.⁵³

That same day, Stimson's office issued its own press release which indicated that the United States would continue to make more and more powerful atomic weapons and expressed confidence that the atomic bomb would help shorten the war against Japan.⁵⁴

⁵³ Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:422–23.

⁵⁴ Press release by Henry Stimson, August 6, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Subject File, HSTP, HSTPL.

To further underline the shock of the atomic bomb and undermine Japanese propaganda in order to compel Japan's surrender, U.S. bombers soon dropped six million leaflets on Japanese cities which called on the inhabitants to evacuate their cities and explained that, because Japan's leaders had rejected the Potsdam ultimatum, the United States had annihilated Hiroshima with an atomic bomb, and the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan. "We are in possession of the most destructive explosive ever devised by man. A single one of our newly developed atomic bombs is actually the equivalent in explosive power to what 2000 of our giant B-29's can carry on a single mission," one leaflet proclaimed. If the Japanese had any doubt about America's atomic power, the leaflet encouraged them to "make inquiry as to what happened to Hiroshima when just one atomic bomb fell on that city." The leaflet warned that the U.S. would use the bomb "to destroy every resource of the military by which they are prolonging this useless war," and urged the Japanese to "petition the Emperor to end the war" according to the "honorable surrender" that President Truman had outlined in the Potsdam Proclamation. By accepting "these consequences," the Japanese could begin building "a new, better, and peace-loving Japan" but, if Japan did not "cease military resistance," the leaflet warned that "we shall resolutely employ this bomb and all our other superior weapons to promptly and forcefully end the war. EVACUATE YOUR CITIES."⁵⁵

Because Japan did not immediately surrender, in spite of the tremendous devastation, questions persisted about how much destruction and killing Tokyo was willing to endure and how much Washington was willing to exact. U.S. military strategists doubted that Japan was ready to surrender. The OPD reported, "American military leaders were slow to abandon their conservative estimate of Japanese capacity for resistance even after the Hiroshima attack." U.S. strategists

⁵⁵ Atomic Bomb Leaflets, National Archives, Leaflets Dropped on Japanese Cities in Conjunction with the Atomic Bomb, 1945, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL; Translation of leaflet dropped on the Japanese, August 10, 1945; Translation of leaflet dropped on the Japanese (AB-11), August 10, 1945, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTP, HSTPL.

therefore prepared to further demonstrate America's willingness and capacity to defeat and occupy Japan. In a memo to General George Lincoln on August 7, OPD Colonel Charles H. Bonesteel III explained:

Undoubtedly the biggest question in their minds is how many atomic bombs have we and where are we going to drop the next one! ...The matter of the occupation of Japan is probably very high in importance in the Japs minds. They would unquestionably wish to avoid a physical occupation at all costs... Our belief is that occupation in some form is necessary in order, first, to impress the people of Japan with their military defeat and, second, in order that positive action can be taken to guide the Japanese into the form of government best fitted to achieve our aims.

Until Japan accepted the Potsdam Proclamation, U.S. strategists were more than willing to continue their unlimited attacks by firebombing and atomic bombing. Truman noted in his diary that the U.S. gave Japanese leaders three days to "make up their minds" and surrender but nothing happened. In the meantime, "we indicated that we meant business" as American B-29s continued to bomb Japanese cities day and night.⁵⁶ Military officers thought the U.S. still needed time to "beat the Japanese down" and General Farrell reported on August 8 that "it would take at least one more bomb before the Empire would realize the power of the weapon." While Japan continued to resist, Bonesteel noted that "time and atomic explosives are working for us"⁵⁷

Tokyo's intransigence also hardened some strategists who had hoped that the ultimatum and prompt promised destruction would lead to Japan's surrender. All summer, Joseph Grew had suggested that the United States could moderate its attitude to achieve the equivalent of unconditional surrender. Indeed, Grew wanted to preserve the Mikado in order to save American lives and facilitate Japan's capitulation. After the bombing of Hiroshima and considerable thought, however, Grew wrote to James Byrnes on August 7 and explained that if Japan continued to reject

⁵⁶ Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:426.

⁵⁷ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

the Potsdam Proclamation and refused to surrender unconditionally thus requiring an American invasion of the home islands and resulting in the loss of American lives, then the United States should treat Emperor Hirohito as a war criminal, “that full justice might be done.” Grew acknowledged that listing the Emperor as a war criminal did not mean that he would be automatically convicted – that would depend on whether the Emperor had planned and executed some of the “atrocious aspects” of the war or whether he was merely a puppet in the hands of the country’s military leaders. But Grew nevertheless seemed indignant and aggrieved by Japanese stubbornness. If the emperor had the power to command Japanese forces to cease resistance but refused to do so, beyond the point of necessity and reason and at the cost of hundreds of thousands of his own people as well as thousands of American soldiers, he deserved to be tried as a war criminal.⁵⁸

On August 8, Japan received a second shock when the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. U.S. strategists had discussed Soviet involvement for months and hoped that the additional diplomatic pressure against Japan would show Tokyo that the Allies were united and that there was no hope of negotiating a conditional peace while the added military pressure could overcome Japanese forces in Asia. Conservatives and anti-communists at home resisted Soviet participation, however, fearing that the communists would demand a share of the Japanese occupation and that the Red Army could dominate East Asia.

At Potsdam, Truman welcomed assurances of Soviet participation, believing that the combination of an American invasion and Soviet involvement would overcome Japan’s resistance once and for all. After talking with Stalin, Truman obtained an explicit pledge that the Soviets would enter the war against Japan by August 15, “Fini Japs when that comes about,” Truman wrote in his

⁵⁸ *FRUS, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, vol. VI, no. 660.

diary on July 17.⁵⁹ The next day, however, Truman stated that he believed the U.S. could win the war alone with just the atomic bomb. “Japs will fold up before Russia comes in. I am sure they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland,” he wrote.⁶⁰ The next week, in a conference with Stalin on July 25, Stimson hoped that the Allies’ combined forces would lead not only to a complete victory, but a short one, and save lives on all sides.⁶¹

After Suzuki and the Japanese government rejected the Potsdam Proclamation, the Allies formally approached the Soviet government to join the war against Japan in order to “shorten the length of the war, reduce the number of victims, and assist in the prompt reestablishment of general peace.” “Faithful to its obligations,” the Soviets accepted the Allied request and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov handed Sato, the Japanese ambassador, the Soviet declaration of war against Japan on August 8. The declaration further explained, like the Potsdam Proclamation, that the Soviets hoped to accelerate peace, deliver its people from further sacrifices and suffering, and enable Japan to avoid the same destructive fate of Germany.⁶² Upon declaring war, 1.5 million Soviet soldiers promptly invaded Manchuria.⁶³

By the time Truman arrived back in the states on August 7, preparations were underway for a second atomic attack. There were no additional orders or further decisions since the prevailing strategy called for a second atomic bomb to indicate to Japanese leaders that the United States had an unlimited supply and that the U.S. would solemnly follow through on its threat to rain ruin on Japan until they surrendered. With no sign from Tokyo, the crew of *Bock's Car*, commanded by Maj.

⁵⁹ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 59; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 56–57.

⁶⁰ Truman and Ferrell, *Off the Record*, 53–54.

⁶¹ *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, unnumbered document following Doc. 710, #109,

⁶² *FRUS, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. II, unnumbered document following Doc. 710, #132, no. 1382.

⁶³ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 90; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 80.

Charles Sweeney, headed for Kokura on August 9 but clouds, smoke, and smog obscured the target site, so they flew on to Nagasaki and dropped the second atomic bomb nicknamed “Fat Man.” Nagasaki’s economy centered on the Mitsubishi Corporation whose steel mills, arms plant, and shipyards employed ninety percent of Nagasaki’s workforce. But although the city was a major shipping and industrial city on Kyushu and had a population of 210,000, it was not included as one of the six initial targets by the Target Committee and was added to the list of cities to be destroyed late in the summer.⁶⁴ The second atomic bomb obliterated approximately forty-four percent of the city’s urban area although the center of Nagasaki was spared total destruction because of the steep hills that surrounded it and mitigated the blast effects.⁶⁵ The bomb also did not produce a firestorm as at Hiroshima, but the effects of the attack were still ghastly; approximately 45,000 Japanese were killed and a similar number were injured. Together, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed an unknown number of people in all, but recent assessments have estimated that, by December 1945, about 166,000 had died in Hiroshima and 60,000 to 80,000 had died in Nagasaki from the effects of the two atomic bombs.⁶⁶

TRUMAN’S MORAL GROUND

Publicly and privately, President Truman and Secretary Stimson defended the use of the atomic bombs. The United States had given Japan fair warning, attacked military bases, retaliated against Japanese atrocities, and had deployed the bombs to end the war and save American lives. Truman outlined the most important moral claims in a nation-wide radio address after the bombing of Nagasaki on August 9.

⁶⁴ John Stone to General Arnold, July 24, 1945; The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Subject File, HSTP, HSTPL.

⁶⁵ Curtis E. LeMay, “B-29 Campaign in the Pacific,” undated, JAR.

⁶⁶ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 90, 92–93; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 77.

The President stated that the Allies had “given the Japanese people adequate warning of what is in store for them.” Through the Potsdam Proclamation, the Allies had set out the surrender terms but “Our warning went unheeded; our terms were rejected.” Japan would not cease resistance and surrender, so Japan had suffered the consequences with the atomic bomb.⁶⁷ As Stimson wrote, the atomic bomb fulfilled the threats of the proclamation to destroy Japanese forces and their homeland.⁶⁸

Truman also called on the world to note that Hiroshima was “a military base” and that the U.S. had targeted the city because they wanted “to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians.”⁶⁹ Hiroshima did contain some military targets – the headquarters of the Japanese Army for southern Japan, an assembly area for soldiers, a communications center, and a port that served as the main embarkation point for China. Because of those facilities, the Truman administration could and did claim that Hiroshima was a military base. Stimson likewise claimed that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were “active working parts of the Japanese war effort” because Hiroshima served as a major point for military storage and assembly while Nagasaki was a major Japanese seaport and contained large industrial plants which fed Japan’s war effort. Stimson and other strategists therefore argued that the atomic bombs had hit cities which were crucial to Japan’s military leaders who seemed to hold the cards for surrender.⁷⁰

But the Japanese government rightly noted in a formal protest on August 9 that Hiroshima lacked “military fortifications or installations” and that the bomb had indiscriminately massacred combatants and non-combatants alike which violated the international rules of warfare.⁷¹ To the

⁶⁷ Harry S. Truman, “Radio Report to the American People on the Potsdam Conference,” August 9, 1945, APP.

⁶⁸ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 625.

⁶⁹ Harry S. Truman, “Radio Report to the American People on the Potsdam Conference,” August 9, 1945, APP.

⁷⁰ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 625–26.

⁷¹ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 94–95.

extent that the bombs were precision attacks that destroyed military targets, they could have been justified but, as the Target Committee had already reported, the atomic bomb aimed at dual targets – military targets surrounded by war workers. The bombs were therefore completely disproportionate for the precise military objectives that they supposedly targeted, and the civilians killed by the bombs were not merely excessive collateral damage, but intentional targets meant to maximize the bomb's effectiveness and psychological impact. Contrary to Truman's statement, the United States absolutely did not try to avoid civilian casualties as much as possible. The bombs, then, were not intended as precision attacks, but area attacks on entire urban populations. The cities absolutely aided and abetted Japan's war effort, as Stimson had asserted, but, as John Ford and others had argued – contrary to strategic air power doctrine – a city's or a civilian's war contributions did not make them justifiable targets for annihilation, even in a total war.

In his broadcast, Truman announced, however, that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were only the beginning – “only a warning of things to come” – and he threatened that, if Japan still did not surrender, more atomic bombs would have to be dropped on Japanese war industries which would result in thousands of civilian deaths. He therefore urged Japanese civilians to evacuate their cities and “save themselves from destruction.” At the same time, while Truman had defended its use, he explained that the atomic bomb was a necessary evil. The President claimed, “I realize the tragic significance of the atomic bomb,” but he argued that its use was justified in retaliation for Japanese aggression and was intended to win the war and save American lives. Truman declared,

Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans.

However evil the bomb's results, the President insisted that it was expedient and he warned that the United States would continue to use the atomic bomb "until we completely destroy Japan's power to make war. Only a Japanese surrender will stop us."⁷²

Other strategists made similar claims. Military officials viewed the bombs mostly as retribution. In his biennial report to the Secretary of War, General Marshall explained that the atomic bombs made Japan pay for the treacheries at Mukden, Shanghai, Pearl Harbor, and Bataan.⁷³ The same day as Truman's broadcast, Stimson also released a statement which succinctly stated that the bomb was justified because it would win the war and save American lives: "We believe that its use will save the lives of American soldiers and bring more quickly to an end the horror of this war which the Japanese leaders deliberately started. Therefore, the bomb is being used."⁷⁴

Truman's perspective changed, however, as he received more information about the atomic attacks. After he returned home from the Potsdam Conference on August 7, Stimson debriefed him on Hiroshima the next day and the president received a full report, with photographs, by August 10. The report contained first-hand accounts and reconnaissance photos and gave a conservative estimate that the bomb had killed at least 100,000 people. The destruction clearly affected the president because he told his cabinet on August 10 that no more atomic bombs would be used without his direct authorization. But despite the apparent softening of Truman's views on the atomic bombs, U.S. strategists did not relax their stance on conventional strategic and firebombing which continued even *after* the atomic bombs. Thankfully though, Truman never had to authorize another atomic attack.⁷⁵

⁷² Harry S. Truman, "Radio Report to the American People on the Potsdam Conference," August 9, 1945, APP.

⁷³ *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939-30 June 1945*, 182.

⁷⁴ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 634.

⁷⁵ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 103; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 85.

Some Americans, however, insisted that the United States was not going far enough to destroy and defeat Japan and they dismissed calls for warning, leniency, or moral considerations. After the attack on Hiroshima, Senator Richard Russell (D-GA) sent a fierce telegram to Truman on August 7 and encouraged him to continue the unlimited war until Japan surrendered unconditionally. Russell complained that the Truman Administration was using too much diplomacy and too little force to end the war. “Permit me to respectfully suggest that we cease our efforts to cajole Japan into surrendering in accordance with the Potsdam Declaration,” he wrote to the President. “Let us carry the war to them until they beg us to accept the unconditional surrender.”⁷⁶

Russell accused the Truman administration of being too lenient toward Japan. By issuing a warning through the Potsdam Proclamation and suggesting that Emperor Hirohito be preserved, Russell believed the U.S. was handling Japan more delicately and offering a gentler peace than it had to Germany. It was Japan’s “foul attack on Pearl Harbor” that had brought the United States into the Second World War and caused so much suffering and grief and Russell demanded that Japan pay the fullest price for its treachery. “I earnestly insist Japan should be dealt with as harshly as Germany and that she should not be the beneficiary of a soft peace,” he announced. Contrary to Joseph Grew, who had repeatedly asked to save the emperor (and unaware that Grew’s own views on the emperor had hardened), Russell contended that most Americans thought there was nothing “sacrosanct about Hirohito. He should go,” the Senator declared. In fact, Russell argued that Japan’s contemptuous response to the Potsdam ultimatum “justifies a revision of that document and sterner peace terms.”

Japan had rejected its chance to claim a more honorable peace and now Russell wanted the U.S. to take its gloves off and make Japan feel the hard hand of war. He indicated that the United

⁷⁶ Telegram, Richard Russell to Harry S. Truman, August 7, 1945, Official File, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

States should continue to use the atomic bomb until Japan gave up and, “If we do not have available a sufficient number of atomic bombs with which to finish the job immediately, let us carry on with TNT and fire bombs until we can produce them.” Russell also wanted the bombings to continue without warnings in order to save American lives. “I also hope that you will issue orders forbidding the officers in command of our air forces from warning Jap cities that they will be attacked,” he wrote. Such “showmanship can only result in the unnecessary loss of many fine boys in our air force as well as our helpless prisoners in the hands of the Japanese.” So convinced was he by Japanese treachery and brutality that Russell even worried that Bataan survivors would surely be brought into warned cities so that the Americans would end up killing some of their own.

Russell recognized the ruthlessness and severity of his convictions, but he argued that such indurate policies were justified in an unlimited war. “This was a total war as long as our enemies held all of the cards. Why should we change the rules now, after the blood, treasure and enterprise of the American people have given us the upper hand,” he asked. Japan had waged a barbaric war for nearly ten years, why should Americans have to act civilly? Moreover, to act morally after Japan had disregarded all semblance of restraint, law, or ethics would also throw away America’s well-earned military advantage.

Finally, Russell claimed that his appeal represented the implacable will of the American people who were determined to totally defeat Japan. The Senator told the President, “Our people have not forgotten that the Japanese struck us the first blow in this war without the slightest warning” and he called on Truman to stop appeasing and continue attacking Japan until Tokyo broke. Russell exclaimed, “They believe that we should continue to strike the Japanese until they are

brought groveling to their knees. We should cease our appeals to Japan to sue for peace. The next plea for peace should come from an utterly destroyed Tokyo.”⁷⁷

On August 9, two days after Senator Russell complained that the United States had not gone far enough in pursuing unlimited war, President Truman received a telegram from Samuel McCrea Cavert who complained that the United States had gone too far. As the General Secretary of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, Cavert explained that many Christians were “deeply disturbed” by the atomic bombs because of their indiscriminate destruction and because they set an “extremely dangerous precedent for [the] future of mankind.” Cavert reported that Bishop Oxnam, the President of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, and John Foster Dulles, who chaired the Council’s Commission on a Just and Durable Peace, were preparing to release a statement calling for the atomic bombs as a trust for humanity and that Japan “be given genuine opportunity and time to verify facts about [the] new bomb and to accept surrender terms.” Cavert respectfully urged the President to give Japan the opportunity to reconsider the Potsdam ultimatum before launching any further atomic attacks.⁷⁸

Confronted with one telegram that justified the atomic bombs and another that denounced their use, Truman’s responses to each one marked the perimeter of the moral ground he was trying to claim. Truman responded to Richard Russell’s ironfisted telegram on August 9 – the same day he received the telegram from Cavert – and resisted the Senator’s appeal for unlimited warfare. The President wrote:

I know that Japan is a terribly cruel and uncivilized nation in warfare but I can’t bring myself to believe that, because they are beasts, we should ourselves act in the same manner.

⁷⁷ Telegram, Richard Russell to Harry S. Truman, August 7, 1945, Official File, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

⁷⁸ Correspondence between Harry S. Truman and Samuel Cavert, August 11, 1945, Official File, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

For myself, I certainly regret the necessity of wiping out whole populations because of the “pigheadedness” of the leaders of a nation and, for your information, I am not going to do it unless it is absolutely necessary. It is my opinion that after the Russians enter into war the Japanese will very shortly fold up.

My object is to save as many American lives as possible but I also have a humane feeling for the women and children in Japan.⁷⁹

In his response to Russell, Truman sought to reclaim the moral high ground for the United States. Although he agreed with Russell on the seriousness of Japanese aggression and atrocities, he wanted to keep the U.S. from sinking to the same moral level. Two wrongs did not make a right and the President did not believe that Japanese savagery justified Americans in doing the same. Similarly, while Truman agreed that the United States might need to destroy additional Japanese cities to force Tokyo to surrender, he lamented the consequences of military necessity and vowed that he would not annihilate Japanese civilians unless there was no other choice. The Senator and the President therefore differed on the nuances of necessity. For Russell, the absolute expediency of bombing to the point of extermination had already been proved. Japan’s government had rejected the Potsdam ultimatum and continued to fight a futile war, leaving the U.S. with no other recourse but to keep killing Japanese until Tokyo sued for peace. Truman, however, did not think the U.S. had reached that point yet. Although he clearly thought that an atomic bomb was necessary to defeat Japan without an invasion, he resisted the idea that entire Japanese populations needed to be eradicated. In fact, he felt that the Japanese would accept the futility of further resistance and surrender to the Allies after the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. Caught between the value of opposing lives, Truman believed the bombs were justified by saving American lives, but he nevertheless hesitated for humanitarian reasons to destroy Japanese lives and admitted that the morality of saving American soldiers did not automatically reduce the immorality of killing Japanese civilians.

⁷⁹ Harry S. Truman to Richard Russell, August 9, 1945, Official File, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

On August 11, two days after responding to Russell, Truman wrote to Samuel Cavert but took a position diametrically different from the one he had assumed with Russell. While expressing solidarity with American Christians, the President nevertheless resisted Cavert's pious plea for restraint. Truman wrote:

Nobody is more disturbed over the use of the Atomic bombs than I am but I was greatly disturbed over the unwarranted attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor and their murder of our prisoners of war. The only language they seem to understand is the one we have been using to bombard them.

When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true.⁸⁰

Truman insisted that he took the atomic bombs seriously and had been perturbed by their effects more than anyone. But, while he understood Christians' distress, he also felt distressed by Japanese atrocities and invoked Russell's reminders about Pearl Harbor and the fate of American POWs to justify the atomic attacks. While Cavert wanted to give the Japanese the opportunity to reconsider the Potsdam Proclamation, Truman felt the Japanese had had their chance and had rejected the Allies' diplomatic terms. And, since Japan would not or could not understand the language of diplomacy, the United States was justified in employing the language of force. He regretted that the war had come to this, but the President felt that the atomic bombs were a necessary evil for dealing with Japanese monsters.

At first glance, Truman's responses to Russell and Cavert might resemble a politician's pretension and suggest that the President was talking out of two sides of his mouth. But Truman's seemingly contradictory telegrams reveal, rather, that the President was conflicted between his humanitarian feelings for Japan's women and children and his disgust for Japanese cruelty, incivility, pigheadedness, and bestiality. Truman did not explain to Cavert how to deal with or treat a beast

⁸⁰ Correspondence between Harry S. Truman and Samuel Cavert, August 11, 1945, Official File, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, HSTPL.

without turning into one as he worriedly expressed to Russell but, together, his telegrams offered a guide. By dropping the atomic bombs and threatening total annihilation while showing some restraint and not bombing Japan interminably and saving American lives, he hoped that the United States could destroy the Japanese devil without going to Hell. Truman's use of the atomic bombs thus amounted to sufficient evil and his insistence that he was trying to win the war while saving American lives amounted to a moral justification for the bombs that staked out ethical ground in the midst of an unlimited war and allowed the United States to slay the beast without becoming one.

Other Christian leaders proposed suspending atomic attacks altogether in order to avoid becoming the very monster that the U.S. was trying to overthrow. On August 10, Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, President of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, and John Foster Dulles, chairman of the council's Commission on a Just and Durable Peace issued a joint statement which warned that the "scientific miracle" of the atomic bomb might make the planet uninhabitable and urged a temporary suspension to give Tokyo and the Japanese people time to "react."⁸¹

The statement acknowledged that the United States had the unprecedented power "to wreak upon our enemy mass destruction such as men have never before imagined." However, the statement warned that unlimited nuclear war was morally wrong and could destroy the world:

That will inevitably obliterate men and women, young and aged, innocent and guilty alike, because they are part of a nation which has attacked us and whose conduct has stirred our deep wrath. If we, a professedly Christian nation, feel morally free to use atomic energy in that way men elsewhere will accept that verdict. Atomic weapons will be looked upon as a normal part of the arsenal of war and the stage will be set for the sudden and final destruction of mankind.⁸²

⁸¹ "Oxnam, Dulles Ask Halt In Bomb Use," *NYT*, August 10, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [4 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

⁸² "Oxnam, Dulles Ask Halt In Bomb Use," *NYT*, August 10, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [4 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

By using nuclear weapons, the United States killed non-combatants along with combatants, the innocent and the guilty simply because they belonged to an enemy nation. Such warfare contradicted America's Christian values and the statement warned that if the United States felt no compunction about atomic bombs, no other nation would either and war would simply become nuclear war, potentially threatening human civilization and existence.

Oxnam and Dulles recommended a different choice. Recognizing that the nuclear Pandora's box was "a trust for the benefit of humanity," the statement recalled Truman's assertion that nuclear power could be used to maintain peace as much as make war. The statement therefore called on the United States "to show quickly and dramatically how our new power can be used to stop war not merely prosecute it." In the war against Japan, that would mean "a temporary suspension or alteration" of America's bombing campaign to allow the Japanese people and leaders to adapt to the new atomic threats and accept the Allies' surrender terms. Oxnam and Dulles thus proposed that the United States adopt a *limited war*. They admitted that the meek strength to possess such overwhelming power and not use it would require "great self-restraint," but they believed that the United States would be rewarded for its virtue. They affirmed, "our supremacy is now so overwhelming that such restraint would be taken everywhere as evidence not of weakness but of moral and physical greatness." Oxnam and Dulles prayed that American leaders would "find and follow the way of Christian statesmanship" and urged Americans to support "all measures which may promote a just and durable peace."⁸³

Elsewhere, public moral criticisms of Truman and the atomic bombs continued. In a service at Trinity Church on Wall Street and Broadway in New York City, Reverend Bernard Iddings Bell (appropriately from Providence) declared that victory by the atomic bomb would come "at the price

⁸³ "Oxnam, Dulles Ask Halt In Bomb Use," *NYT*, August 10, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [4 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

of world-wide moral revulsion against us.” Considering the immense destruction wrought on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Bell doubted if Christian missions in Asia would “ever again matter.” He explained, “The Orient has long perceived that Anglo-Saxon diplomacy is based not on Christian principles but on a canny imperialistic expediency,” and the atomic bombs had seemingly proved Western hypocrisy. “Now it has been shown that our methods of war are cosmically and cold-bloodedly barbarous beyond previous experience or possibility,” he preached. Unbelievably, the United States had killed 100,000 people in Hiroshima with a single bomb, most of them civilians, and then, despite the “universal horror,” had repeated the performance at Nagasaki. Because of the atomic bombs, Bell worried that American religion and democracy “stand discredited in all Asia and elsewhere too.”⁸⁴

At the *New York Times*, Hanson W. Baldwin likewise insisted that “the United States [had] sacrificed its moral leadership of the world” by bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Inasmuch as strategic bombing was just as catastrophic for civilians as atomic bombing though, American moral leadership had really ended with the bombing of European cities. Baldwin explained the lack of difference: “The fire attacks upon Japanese cities burned people to death fully as irrevocably as did the atomic bomb. The atomic bomb had a quantitative advantage in death and annihilation; more people were killed, more burned, more homes destroyed, but actually the moral principle involved in its use was no different from that established a thousand times before in the war.” Regardless, by bombing civilians, the United States had forfeited its status as a moral leader on earth.⁸⁵

Baldwin acknowledged the possible arguments for justification: Germany and Japan had started the evil practice of bombing civilians, no one could make war moral, or that the U.S. had

⁸⁴ “Oxnam, Dulles Ask Halt In Bomb Use,” *NYT*, August 10, 1945; Yale University – Documents Pertaining to the Atomic Bomb [4 of 4], Box 2, ABC, HSTPL.

⁸⁵ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Atomic Bomb Responsibilities: Resolving of Problem in Relation to Peace is Linked to Moral Leadership of America,” *NYT*, September 12, 1945.

actually hastened the end of the war and saved lives. Perhaps one could even argue that by making war so horrible the United States could make it humanitarian – that by waging war and bombing civilians, belligerents could make war so awful that would become impossible or unthinkable. But Baldwin rejected all of these moral claims. The United States, he indicated, could not do good or accomplish moral ends by doing evil and carrying out immoral means. He proposed, as many others had, that the United States take steps to outlaw nuclear weapons except in instances of retaliation.⁸⁶

FINAL SURRENDER

U.S. strategists could not have predicted how Tokyo would react to the atomic bombs, but several sources from the JCS indicated that, for some military officials, the “atomic bomb was considered to have changed the whole situation in regard to the possibility of ending the war quickly.” Thinking the bomb might compel Japan’s early surrender, the OPD began the documentary process of preparing for an early surrender before the start of Operation Olympic in November.⁸⁷

Tokyo did not learn the fate of Hiroshima until the morning of August 7 because of the loss of communications and, although die-hard militarists insisted that the White House statement was propaganda and that Japan should continue the war, Emperor Hirohito was deeply disturbed by the destruction of the city and recognized that the mortal and moral calculus for the war had changed. (Walker, 80-81) Three days later, as the Japanese Supreme Council argued about whether to surrender, they received news of the attack on Nagasaki which dispelled all the false illusions that the U.S. did not have any or any more nuclear weapons. Nagasaki also proved that the United States

⁸⁶ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Atomic Bomb Responsibilities: Resolving of Problem in Relation to Peace is Linked to Moral Leadership of America,” *NYT*, September 12, 1945.

⁸⁷ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

would continue to obliterate Japanese cities with atomic bombs until Japan surrendered. Gridlocked by hubris and obduracy, several high-ranking officials prevailed upon the emperor to intercede, and Hirohito personally broke the deadlock by expressing the willingness to accept the Potsdam Proclamation on the condition that the imperial throne be preserved. The militarists accepted the emperor's will, but they were ironically helped by the atomic bomb which allowed them to save face.⁸⁸

As unofficial reports of Japan's surrender offer reached Washington on August 10, Truman gathered his advisors to consider whether Tokyo had accepted the Potsdam Proclamation to their satisfaction and whether the United States should accept the Japanese surrender.⁸⁹ The United States had always insisted on unconditional surrender but now U.S. strategists had a peace offer that could end the war immediately *if* the emperor could stay on the throne. Everyone wanted a swift end to the war but felt uncertain about Tokyo's imperial reservation which sparked another round of animated discussions about U.S. objectives and the nuances of unconditional surrender.

Secretary of War Henry Stimson urged the president to accept the offer, but he incorrectly interpreted Japan's demands to retain the emperor, thinking that Hirohito would only remain in a ceremonial role. Even if the Japanese had not raised the issue though, Stimson thought the U.S. would likely need the emperor under American command and supervision in order to convince Japan's remaining armies to surrender since they would not recognize or obey any other authority. Stimson also told the President that they needed to save the emperor in order to save Americans "from a score of bloody Iwo Jimas and Okinawas all over China and the New Netherlands." Under Secretary of State Joseph Grew and others also supported saving the emperor to make peace, arguing that the war could be ended without any more bloodshed by revising unconditional

⁸⁸ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 95–99; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 82–83.

⁸⁹ Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:428.

surrender. But other strategists insisted that Hirohito had to go, along with the Mikado and Japanese militarism and, despite Grew's experience and insight into Japanese politics due to his years as ambassador to Hirohito's court, the American hard-liners attacked him and those who sided with him as appeasers.⁹⁰ Secretary of State James Byrnes insisted that the U.S. could not accept Japan's conditional surrender while Truman wondered whether the U.S. could retain the emperor and still excise Japan's "warlike spirit."⁹¹ The Truman administration was also a victim of its own anti-Japanese attitudes. So many U.S. officials had disparaged the emperor during the war that Truman and Byrnes did not think the government could now preserve him without facing backlash from the American public. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal cleverly negotiated the diplomatic impasse by suggesting that the U.S. indicate its willingness to accept Japan's offer but define the surrender terms in a way that comported to the Potsdam Proclamation. In that way, the United States could still accomplish Japan's unconditional surrender *and* end the war immediately. Truman agreed and noted in his diary that some officials wanted to make a condition for the emperor, but his advisors held firm. "Our terms are 'unconditional.' [The Japanese] wanted to keep the Emperor. We told 'em we'd tell 'em how to keep him, but we'd make the terms," he wrote.⁹²

Following Forrestal's ductile diplomacy, Truman had Byrnes and his staff (with help from Stimson and Leahy) draft a response that charily sidestepped any guarantees about the emperor but called on Hirohito to order all Japanese forces to lay down their arms and submit to Allied control even as he subjected his authority to the Supreme Allied Commander. The U.S. response, therefore, did not make any promises, but they implicitly recognized the emperor's role by stipulating that his power must be subject to the Supreme Allied commander. Allied forces would then occupy Japan

⁹⁰ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 626–27.

⁹¹ Truman, *Memoirs: 1945, Year of Decisions*, 1:428.

⁹² Truman and Ferrell, *Off the Record*, 61.

until the purposes of the Potsdam Proclamation had been accomplished but Japan's form of government would ultimately be determined by the Japanese people. In this way, the United States could accept Japan's offer without appearing to retreat from the Potsdam terms.⁹³

U.S. strategists hoped Japan would accept the terms and surrender unconditionally but, while the White House awaited Tokyo's next move, American military commanders continued their unlimited war and prepared for the invasion of Kyushu. Night and day, LeMay's B-29s decimated Japanese cities as if there were no diplomacy at work or even any chance that the war could end short of Japan's total annihilation. The prospect of Japan's unconditional surrender or continued resistance remained unclear on August 12. Army intelligence still believed that Tokyo would drag out negotiations to secure more favorable terms which Japan would interpret as a victory for them and an indication of Allied weakness. Intelligence officials therefore advised that the war might continue in spite of the atomic bombs. Japanese suicide attacks could still inflict considerable damage on the invasion forces and officials warned that "Large, well disciplined, well armed, undefeated Japanese ground forces have a capacity to offer stubborn fanatic resistance to Allied ground operations in the homeland and may inflict heavy Allied casualties."⁹⁴

Meanwhile, as Byrnes' reply made its way to Tokyo on August 10, General Carl Spaatz, who commanded the U.S. Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific planned a third atomic bomb for Tokyo to persuade the government leaders to surrender. Truman despaired that, if Japan still refused to surrender, he would have no choice but to authorize a nuclear attack on the Japanese capital but,

⁹³ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 101–2; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 84–85.

⁹⁴ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

thankfully, the U.S. did not have a third bomb at the ready. If another bomb had been available, the U.S. likely would have dropped it on Tokyo sometime after August 9.⁹⁵

In the Japanese capital, Byrnes' reply disappointed Japanese leaders who were hoping for outright acceptance from Washington and ignited another debate about what surrender and resistance would cost Japan. The fact that the high command remained divided about abandoning the war, even *after* the atomic bombs and the Soviet invasion, indicated that the Japanese were undeniably not on the verge of surrender *before* the atomic attacks. Once again, the emperor was called upon to settle the stalemate. On August 14, Hirohito met with the cabinet and the Supreme Council and, after securing the support of the imperial family and hearing the arguments for surrender and resistance, he rejected the hard-liners in the War Cabinet and the Supreme War Council and restated his support for ending the war on U.S. terms. Overruled by the emperor, the cabinet ratified Hirohito's decision to finally end hostilities and the foreign ministry conveyed the surrender decision to the four Allies.⁹⁶

At the last minute, some fanatical junior officers and other extremists refused to comply with the emperor's decision and tried to sabotage the peace process by assassinating peace advocates and launching a coup d'état. They were opposed and overcome, however, by key officials like General Korechika Anami, the War Minister, who remained loyal to the emperor despite his personal disagreements. Although he refused to join the seditious plot and signed the surrender document with the rest of the cabinet on August 14, the general committed ritual suicide (*seppuku*)

⁹⁵ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 103, 106–7; Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*, 188.

⁹⁶ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 85–86; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 104–5.

the next morning. That day, the White House received the news of Japan's unconditional surrender which Truman announced as a full acceptance of the Potsdam terms.⁹⁷

Since Emperor Hirohito was the only one who could persuade Japanese soldiers to surrender he also recorded a message to the Japanese people which was broadcast at noon on August 15 and announced that Japan would accept the stipulations of the Potsdam Proclamation. Most Japanese had never heard the voice of their supreme leader and they were shocked to hear of their nation's surrender although the emperor was careful never to speak the words "defeat," "surrender," or "capitulation." Instead, without apologizing for Japan's aggression and imperialism, Hirohito blamed America's cruel atomic bomb and explained that further resistance would be futile and lead to the extermination of the Japanese people. The following day, an imperial ceasefire was issued to all Japanese soldiers and the emperor enlisted the support of the imperial family to see that the order was carried out.⁹⁸

Americans throughout the country celebrated the news of Japan's surrender although many remained suspicious of Japanese treachery because of their experiences across the Pacific.⁹⁹ None were more relieved with the end of the war, however, than the U.S. soldiers, sailors, and airmen who were preparing for the invasion of Japan. On September 2, Japan signed the formal instruments of surrender on September 2 aboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay.

VICTORY IN THE PACIFIC

The Pacific War between the United States and Japan unfolded like a heavyweight prize fight. Although Japan stunned the U.S. with an early sucker punch at Pearl Harbor, the U.S. came

⁹⁷ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 105–7; Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 86.

⁹⁸ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 86–87; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 105–6.

⁹⁹ Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 189.

back to dominate the war. After some initial setbacks, the U.S. won every round after 1943 and by the fall of 1944, the outcome of the fight was no longer in doubt. Japan refused to throw in the towel, however. Even as the U.S. began landing more and bigger blows, Japan continued to believe it could wear down the United States and force a split decision or draw. In 1945, the U.S. was well on its way to a famous victory but could not land a knock-out punch that would put Japan on its back and win the fight with a single, devastating blow. Japan could have quit, but pridefully thought that throwing in the towel and conceding defeat would be more humiliating than losing outright and that the U.S. would tire and end the fight short of the final bell. In the final rounds, however, after Japan refused an ultimatum to quit immediately, the U.S. armed itself with loaded atomic gloves and landed two massive strikes which staggered Japan while the Soviet Union jumped into the ring alongside the U.S. to tag-team the last round. Finally, Japan conceded defeat and ended the fight.

The use of the atomic bombs and the end of the war against Japan in 1945 remains one of the most controversial issues in American history. Perhaps no event or issue in American history has spilled so much scholarly ink and sweat than the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki since the controversy “goes to the very heart of what Americans believe about themselves and how other peoples view them.”¹⁰⁰ The major question and point of contention is: “Was the bomb necessary to force a prompt Japanese surrender and end World War II in the Pacific on terms that were acceptable to the United States?”¹⁰¹ The most inflammatory question though, informed by national

¹⁰⁰ Herring, *The American Century and Beyond, U.S. Foreign Relations, 1893-2015*, 291.

¹⁰¹ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, xi. The best answers to the historiographical questions about the atomic bomb are: Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*; Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*; Walker, “Recent Literature on Truman’s Atomic Bomb Decision: The Triumph of the Middle Ground?” in Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan, eds., *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941*, 2d ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Michael Kort, “The Historiography of Hiroshima: The Rise and Fall of Revisionism,” *The New England Journal of History* 64, no. 1 (Fall 2007), 31-48.

myth and emotion more than evidence and ethics, is about whether the use of the atomic bombs was right.¹⁰²

Along the wide gamut of moral arguments about the bombs, “necessity” has become the synonym for morality – if the bombs were necessary, then their use was justified. Some historians assert that the bomb was absolutely necessary to end the war and was therefore completely justified because of Japanese aggression and atrocities and their refusal to surrender. At the opposite end of the moral spectrum, other arguments place Hiroshima alongside Auschwitz as the two evil pillars of the twentieth century and argue that the atomic bombs possessed the moral equivalence of the Nazi Holocaust. As J. Samuel Walker has pointed out though, “No amount of historical evidence will bridge this gap” because the gulf in conclusions comes from the differences in values, priorities, assumptions, and experiences of individual scholars. On balance, the historical record indicates that the bombs shortened the war and saved American lives. The bombs may also have saved more Japanese lives than they cost, but this was inconsequential to U.S. strategists. Were those good enough reasons to annihilate two Japanese cities?¹⁰³

U.S. strategists certainly agonized over the question of how to best defeat Japan and force its unconditional surrender while minimizing American casualties. But scientists at the Manhattan Project were the only ones to stress over the bomb’s use before August 1945. There was no nuclear taboo before Hiroshima and the moral incentive to avoid using nuclear weapons is a postwar phenomenon. Before Hiroshima, the atomic bomb was created to be used; there was no other purpose to it and the Truman administration was desperately searching for a way to win the war and

¹⁰² Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 3.

¹⁰³ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 107–8.

totally defeat Japan, by invasion, if necessary, but U.S. strategists continued to seek for a less costly shortcut if possible.

There were negative incentives for the atomic bomb as well. Truman had no compelling reason not to use it. Militarily, the bomb could end the war quickly, with minimum American casualties. Diplomatically, the bomb could make the Soviets more amenable to American aspirations. If it ended the war quickly, the bomb would be politically popular with Americans while prolonging the war by neglecting the bomb would be disastrous. Moral scruples inhibited the bomb's use but the qualms against it were no different in 1945 than the arguments against strategic bombing and warfare more generally. U.S. strategists had endorsed the principles of air power and strategic bombing long before the war began and, by 1945, they had accepted the bombing of civilians (whether by conventional, incendiary, or atomic weapons) as a legitimate means of waging war. For many strategists, the atomic bomb even had moral considerations on its side because it offered to shorten the war and save American lives without sacrificing total victory. (Walker, 95)

Purely moral considerations, the laws of war, and religious beliefs did not dictate U.S. strategies and decisions, but the desire to achieve total victory in the shortest amount of time, and with the fewest number of losses, was nevertheless a moral concern.

Because U.S. strategists thought the bomb was expedient, their racial attitudes did not propel its use. By all accounts Truman would have used the bomb against Germany if he had thought it necessary to win the war in Europe, especially since Roosevelt first authorized the bomb's development in response to Germany, not Japan. American racial hatreds towards Japan were widespread and vicious, but racism was irrelevant when it came to deciding whether to employ the

bomb. American racism and hostility for Japan largely overrode and blocked any reservations or ambivalence that the Truman administration may have felt about using the atomic bomb.¹⁰⁴

All of these reasons influenced the thinking of American strategists and made the decision to use the bomb easy and obvious. U.S. strategists did not delight in using the bomb against Japan, but they did not agonize over it either. Yet the decision was not inevitable. Truman could have made a different decision but, considering the context of 1945 and the costs, benefits, and alternatives available to U.S. strategists that summer, “it is difficult to imagine Truman or any other American president electing not to use the bomb.”¹⁰⁵

What Caused Japan to Surrender?

The first lesson of the atomic bombs for American strategists, therefore, was that the bombs worked. Because Tokyo surrendered just days after the United States used the atomic bombs, Americans concluded that nuclear weapons had forced Japan’s defeat and won World War II. As the OPD concluded, “In the light of their previous planning estimates, military leaders could hardly avoid concluding that the use of the atomic bomb had materially hastened V-J Day.”¹⁰⁶ Henry Stimson wrote, “Our great objective was thus achieved, and all the evidence I have seen indicates that the controlling factor in the final Japanese decision to accept our terms of surrender was the atomic bomb.”¹⁰⁷ Ever since August 1945, most Americans have insisted that the atomic bombs (and nothing else) had won the war.

A few strategists in 1945 swore though, that the atomic bombs were overrated and had done little to effect Japan’s surrender. Ellis Zacharias, who had always scorned military attempts to force

¹⁰⁴ Walker, 96.

¹⁰⁵ Walker, 96.

¹⁰⁶ Military Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1945; Ferrell, Robert H. – Documents Concerning the Atomic Bomb and Hospital Requirements for the Planned Invasion of Kyushu, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

¹⁰⁷ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 627.

an end to the war, insisted that the atomic bombs had not achieved victory by themselves. “The stunning effect of the atomic bombs on world-wide popular imagination caused an instant belief that the Japanese surrender was solely the result of atomic bombing. And that erroneous belief still persists very widely,” he wrote a year after the war. Indeed, Zacharias contended that Tokyo had already decided to surrender, the atomic bombs merely provided the pretext. He asserted, “Aside from its stunning and horrifying impact on human imagination and its production of a spectacular war climax, the atomic bomb’s effect on the Japanese war was only to hasten, by a very short time, the Japanese expression of a decision already made.”¹⁰⁸ Clearly, Zacharias never fully understood or acknowledged the reactionaries in Tokyo who resisted surrender to the very end.

The Army Air Force also downplayed the significance of the atomic bombs, but for completely opposite reasons. Most air commanders believed that “normal B-29 operations” would have forced Japan to surrender eventually, but “the atomic bomb put such extreme pressure” on Japan that they had to capitulate immediately. In its history of the U.S. air campaign during World War II, the Army Air Force asserted that strategic air power won the war:

The 1945 application of American Air Power, so destructive and concentrated as to cremate 65 Japanese cities in five months, forced an enemy’s surrender without land invasion for the first time in military history. Because of the precedent-shattering performance of the Twentieth Air Force from March to August, 1945, no U.S. soldier, sailor or marine had to land on bloody beachheads or fight through strongly-prepared ground defense to ensure victory in the Jap home islands of Honshu, Kyushu, Hokkaido and Shikoku. Very long-range air power gained victory, decisive and complete.¹⁰⁹

Air Force commanders could not be dissuaded from their doctrines. Years later, General LeMay explained that the atomic bombs had not been completely necessary because strategic bombing had already won the war. General David Burchinal said the same. He related that, after the

¹⁰⁸ Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*, 387–88.

¹⁰⁹ United States Army Air Forces, Personal Narratives Division, *Combat Air Forces of World War II, Army of the United States*, 93-94.

war, the Air Force interviewed the Japanese, and everyone said the war would have ended before the invasion on November 1 because they realized the military could not protect its people anymore and American bombing and blockades were strangling Japan's economy. "It wasn't exactly icing on the cake," LeMay clarified in an interview, but "It is true that the war was over before the atomic bomb was dropped" because the U.S. knew Japan had approached the Soviets about negotiating an end to the war. In LeMay's telling, Truman was concerned about American casualties, "So we used the bombs. The war would have been over in time without dropping the atomic bombs, but every day it went on we were suffering casualties, the Japanese were suffering casualties, and the war bill was going up." LeMay therefore concluded, "From that standpoint, I think the use of the atomic bomb was a wise decision."¹¹⁰

Most research, however, confirms General George Marshall's view that the combination of American atomic bombs and Soviet intervention caused Japan to surrender.¹¹¹ American scholars have traditionally exaggerated the importance of the atomic bombs and deprecated the Soviet intervention, but evidence indicates that the double shock forced Japan to surrender and either event was unlikely to have ended the war as quickly on its own. It was only after the destruction of Hiroshima that Emperor Hirohito explicitly espoused surrender for the first time and only after the Soviet offensive (and after serious indecision), did he assent to the Potsdam provisions.¹¹²

Recent research also suggests more strongly that Japan would likely have ended the war before the American invasion of Kyushu in November 1945 because Japan simply could not continue the fight. Even before the atomic attacks, food supplies in Japan were dwindling, millions

¹¹⁰ Kohn and Harahan, eds., *Strategic Air Warfare*, 69-71.

¹¹¹ *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939-30 June 1945*, 185.

¹¹² Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 82, 87; Herring, *The American Century and Beyond, U.S. Foreign Relations, 1893-2015*, 293.

of Japanese had been bombed out of their homes, hundreds of thousands had burned to death, national morale continued to plummet and, as dire as the invasion seemed to U.S. strategists, it would have been unbelievably calamitous for Japan. By November, therefore, a combination of firebombing, blockade, Soviet intervention, and perhaps an acceptance of the emperor may have ended the war without the use of the atomic bombs, without an invasion, and without fundamentally altering American war aims.¹¹³

But even though the United States might have been able to win the war on its terms without using the atomic bombs, U.S. strategists endorsed their use because they believed it would help them defeat Japan and achieve their overarching goal of total victory. Throughout the war, total victory was so important that U.S. strategists fixated on unconditional surrender in order to defeat, demilitarize, and democratize Japan. Domestic critics and, especially, Japanese resistance, challenged American attitudes, values, and ethics about victory but U.S. strategists remained unshakably committed to unconditional surrender. When the unstoppable force of the U.S. military collided with the immovable object of Japanese resistance, both sides were guilty of diplomatic and institutional inertia. But any claim that the United States could have ended the war earlier presumes that Japan could have surrendered earlier. If there were opportunities to end the war short of atomic Armageddon, the majority of them existed in Tokyo, not in Washington. After all, if Japan really was on the verge of surrender, why did it take Japanese leaders, including Emperor Hirohito, until August of 1945 to make that decision? What were Japanese leaders waiting for?

U.S. intelligence and cryptanalysis in the summer of 1945 indicated that Tokyo was waiting for the invasion. Japanese leaders were waiting and hoping for the opportunity to resist the American onslaught and exact such a high price in American lives that U.S. officials or public

¹¹³ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 89.

opinion would scream for an end to the war short of unconditional surrender, thereby saving Japan from a dishonorable defeat and a humiliating occupation.

Claims that the U.S. could or should have ended the war earlier also imply that the United States should have mitigated its war aims. But because of Japanese resistance, the U.S. could not have conciliated Japan and ended the war without abandoning unconditional surrender and total victory. For U.S. strategists, winning the war decisively was more important than winning quickly or cheaply and historical revisionism and presentism overlook this critical reality. Revisionists also suggest that it would have been just as easy or appropriate for the United States to modify its war aims and forsake unconditional surrender as it would have been for Japan to modify its objectives and relinquish its sovereignty. But ultimately, Tokyo had to abandon its goals while Washington fulfilled theirs because the United States was winning the war and the vanquished do not get to dictate terms to the victors.

The Mortal Calculus of War

While the atomic bombs were intended to achieve victory without enduring American casualties, they also planned to achieve victory by exacting Japanese casualties. In other words, the atomic bombs made a specific cost-benefit analysis – a mortal and moral calculus. The bombs were intended to demonstrate U.S. power, the impossibility of Japanese resistance, and to break Japan by making the costs of war intolerable.

In the Pacific War, American and Japanese strategists both believed and calculated that they could win the war by exacting and enduring sufficient casualties. Whichever nation could inflict and tolerate the most losses would win. After the United States took the initiative in the Pacific and announced the Casablanca Doctrine, the Japanese planned on achieving an outcome less than total defeat by making the cost of the war so high and painful that the United States would negotiate for a

peace short of unconditional surrender. In every island battle, the Japanese refused to surrender, fought to the death, and tried to kill as many Americans as possible in order to raise the human costs of the war to intolerable levels. Tokyo reasoned that if the Japanese could kill or maim enough Americans and defeat America's will to fight before the United States destroyed Japan's capacity to fight, Japan could force the U.S. to retreat from unconditional surrender, maintain the territorial integrity of the home islands, preserve their national sovereignty, and retain the emperor. In that way, Japan could save itself from a humiliating and dishonorable defeat. The United States played by the same assumptions. U.S. strategists believed that every belligerent had a price or breaking point and that if they exacted and endured that price, Tokyo would eventually surrender unconditionally.

In 1945, therefore, as American victory became more inevitable, Tokyo hoped to turn total victory into a Pyrrhic victory for the United States. Despite the United States' superiority in weapons, technology, and logistics, and their successful island-hopping and strategic bombing campaigns, Japanese leaders believed they could take it. They maintained that Japan could suffer innumerable casualties and hardships and still fight on because of their indomitable spirit and their national character (and their militaristic government). Tokyo believed that the United States, on the other hand, was materialistic, decadent, soft, and weak and so while Japan could endure the destruction of its cities and the deaths of its civilians, Japanese leaders believed that the United States was incapable of sustaining the reciprocal casualties necessary to defeat Japan. In short, Tokyo reckoned that the United States could not kill enough Japanese to win the war before their own weak democratic bowels would give out from the loss of blood.

No one in Tokyo identified a definitive crossover point – the number of casualties Japan would have to inflict on the United States to defeat the American will for war and achieve an acceptable peace – but Japanese leaders surely assumed that the United States had a breaking point. Even with dozens of its cities in ruins and declining food supplies, Japanese militarists continued to

believe in these stark calculations. As an American invasion of Japan loomed, Japanese strategists still insisted that the United States could not defeat Japan because the U.S. would have to kill so many Japanese, that the number of reciprocal American casualties would exceed the level of acceptable human costs for the United States. In other words, if the U.S. wanted to exact the number of casualties necessary to defeat Japan, it would of necessity have to endure reciprocal casualties and Japanese leaders did not believe that that the United States was willing to pay that price. They believed that the amount of American blood necessary to defeat Japan and win the war would exceed what Americans could stomach, endure, and accept.

Japanese leaders may have been right. Japanese forces certainly exacted a terrible toll on American forces across the Pacific and an invasion of the home islands may very well have cost hundreds of thousands of casualties. But it is impossible to know exactly how many on either side would have died in an invasion of Japan, or whether Japan would have surrendered before an invasion, because the Pacific War ended in August 1945. The war's mortal calculus had already begun to shift once U.S. air forces could bomb Japan with relative impunity and Japan was always likely to lose after the United States could kill 100,000 of its civilians in a single night. After August 6 though, Tokyo's mortal calculus became irrelevant because the atomic bomb totally turned the tables on the Japanese and shattered their assumptions about the relationship between victory and the human costs of warfare.

Perhaps American leaders and the American people did not have the stomach for the necessary costs of invasion and total victory – Truman, Stimson, the JCS, and others assuredly agonized over the potential invasion casualties and Waldo Heinrichs and Marc Gallicchio have shown that the home front came closer to demanding and accepting a conditional peace agreement

than most Americans would like to admit.¹¹⁴ But the atomic bomb ultimately meant that the United States did not have to invade. What the Japanese did not know, and could never have fathomed, was that the United States had a silver bullet in its arsenal – a secret weapon. With the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the U.S. showed that it was capable and willing to obliterate Japan’s cities, industrial centers, and urban populations at a single stroke. With one bomb dropped from one plane, the United States could annihilate an entire city and kill 80,000 men, women, and children instantly. That reality was terrifying enough by itself but, even more importantly, and shockingly, the U.S. could obliterate a major city at no cost to itself. Japan’s entire conception of victory relied on the assumption that victory would cost more lives than the United States was willing to pay but, in four days in August 1945, the United States overthrew Japan’s hopes for an acceptable peace by proving that it could wipe out Japanese cities for nothing – without its soldiers losing a single drop of blood. The “American Way of War” finally culminated in the most effective attack in history – the most decisive bombardment, the swiftest devastation, and at the lowest cost. To paraphrase Churchill’s famous RAF tribute, never have so many been killed by so few at such little cost. Against such a foe with such a weapon, and such a reality, the Japanese had no hope. How could Japan possibly endure such devastation? How could any nation resist in the face of a merciless enemy that could kill so many, so instantly, and with so much impunity? At Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States revealed to Japan and the rest of the world that victory did not have to cost the U.S. anything. Confronted with the impossible reality of combating an enemy that defied the principle of military reciprocity, it is no wonder that Emperor Hirohito ultimately rejected further resistance and sanctioned peace.

¹¹⁴ Heinrichs and Gallicchio, *Implacable Foes*.

As Truman's telegrams and private writings showed though, the President and his close advisors gave thought to the moral implications of unlimited war and struggled to explain how American strategies were justified. Henry Stimson, in particular, wrestled with the moral implications of the American way of war. Long after the war, John McCloy recalled that Stimson "gave much more and deeper thought to the implications of nuclear weapons than any other member of the administration."¹¹⁵ The Secretary of War eventually determined that the ends of American warfare justified the means. Victory itself provided the moral expiation for American efforts.

Before Japan's formal surrender was even one month old, Stimson retired from public life. Two years later, he published an account of the end of the war and the atomic bombs in *Harper's Magazine* and then discovered that some of his friends doubted the decision to drop the bomb and thought the U.S. could have avoided using it if the Truman administration had known more about Japan's desire to surrender. The former secretary maintained, however, that critics misunderstood the meaning of the war and the basic purpose of the U.S. government and the war effort. The real question, he wrote, was not whether surrender could have been achieved without the bomb, but whether a different diplomatic or military course could have produced surrender earlier and clearly, Truman, Stimson, and other U.S. strategists did not feel that the Japanese considered themselves beaten by the summer of 1945.¹¹⁶

In his memoirs, Stimson considered whether the United States could have won the war earlier – without an invasion, without the atomic bombs and, in effect, without unlimited war – but emphasized that the ends mattered more than the means. He speculated whether a clearer expression of America's willingness to keep the emperor could have helped win the war earlier – as

¹¹⁵ John J. McCloy to Priscilla M. Roberts, November 10, 1982; Roberts, Priscilla – Letter from John J. McCloy, November 10, 1982, Box 1, ABC, HSTPL. For a harsher interpretation see Malloy, *Atomic Tragedy*.

¹¹⁶ Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 628.

Grew, Zacharias, and others had suggested in the summer of 1945. But Stimson and the military advisers had reason to believe that some Japanese leaders would always interpret concession as weakness and, in the midst of the horrors of Okinawa, they did not want to signal Japan that the United States was indeed tiring of the war and could not stomach more fighting. Moreover, Stimson did not believe that anything short of a clear declaration of willingness and readiness to surrender by Japan would have changed American attitudes. No such declaration or gesture from Japan was forthcoming and even reports of weakening Japanese will or peace feelers from some leaders made American officials *more* anxious to compel *all* Japanese leaders to acknowledge the hopelessness of their cause and sue for peace. Moreover, when the United States issued the Potsdam Proclamation and gave Japan a chance to surrender, Tokyo simply ignored and dismissed the warning.

Perhaps the United States did not have to use the atomic bombs to defeat Japan, but Stimson maintained that U.S. strategists were determined to win the war at all costs. Such was “the nature of warmaking,” he wrote. “In war, as in a boxing match, it is seldom sound for the stronger combatant to moderate his blows whenever his opponent shows signs of weakening.” For Stimson, the only path to victory was to wage an unlimited war – “to exert maximum force with maximum speed. It was not the American responsibility to throw in the sponge for the Japanese; that was one thing they must do for themselves.” Indeed, Stimson only ever considered conciliation in regard to the emperor’s role. His coauthor, McGeorge Bundy explained, “only on this question did he later believe that history might find that the United States, by its delay in stating its position had prolonged the war.”¹¹⁷ Stimson concluded, however, that the United States’ chief responsibility was to see the war to the end, accept its costs, and win it.

¹¹⁷ Stimson and Bundy, 628–29.

Stimson also disagreed with postwar critics who assumed that American policy was, or should have been, motivated by the desire to avoid using the bomb, the very opposite of what U.S. strategists intended. Stimson felt this attitude would have been irresponsible. Both during and after the war, he believed that “the dominant fact of 1945 was war, and that therefore, necessarily, the dominant objective was victory. If victory could be speeded by using the bomb, it should be used; if victory must be delayed in order to use the bomb, it should *not* be used.” And as far as Stimson knew, the President and all of Truman’s associates shared the same views. The bomb was never regarded as a separate subject from the war, but as part of the American war effort. Once the decision had been made to use the bomb, its timing and deployment were completely subordinate to the objective and purpose of the war – victory. No effort was ever made or even considered to achieve total victory and Japan’s total defeat in order to *not* use the atomic bomb. Stimson explained, “Surrender was a goal sufficient in itself, wholly transcending the use or nonuse of the bomb. And as it turned out, the use of the bomb in accelerating the surrender, saved many more lives than it cost.”¹¹⁸

Stimson thus concluded that the atomic bomb was justified because it had performed a humanitarian purpose and saved lives on both sides, even though its effects on Japan were appalling. He reasoned that if the war had continued into the fall, the United States would have launched more destructive bombing campaigns which would have caused more deaths than the limited number of atomic bombs that the U.S. then possessed. The atomic bomb proved decisive in August though, because of its physical and psychological effects. The raid on Tokyo in March had caused more damage and inflicted more casualties than either of the atomic bombs, and yet the Japanese continued to fight. But after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as far as the Japanese knew, the United States

¹¹⁸ Stimson and Bundy, 629–30.

had more bombs and the American capacity to destroy Japanese lives and cities seemed limited only by the number of Japanese. As far as Americans knew, therefore, both the reality and the threat of atomic attacks had proved effective in forcing Japan's surrender and, to that extent, the bomb had accomplished its intended purpose.¹¹⁹

The atomic bomb had also directly saved American lives. Stimson recalled that in March 1945 he had visited an air forces distribution center in Florida where he talked with soldiers who had just finished their tour of duty in Europe and were now headed to the Pacific. To Stimson, these men appeared exceedingly weary. They would go to the Pacific and fight well, of course, but the secretary felt a keen duty to save them from combat, if possible. He explained, "the primary obligation of any man responsible for and to these Americans was to end the war as quickly as possible. To discard or fail to use effectively any weapon that might spare them further sacrifice would be irresponsibility so flagrant as to deserve condign punishment." Stimson believed he could not pursue total victory in good conscience if he needlessly endangered American soldiers. He explained,

My chief purpose was to end the war in victory with the least possible cost in the lives of the men in the armies which I had helped to raise. In the light of the alternatives which, on a fair estimate, were open to us I believe that no man, in our position and subject to our responsibilities, holding in his hands a weapon of such possibilities for accomplishing this purpose and saving those lives, could have failed to use it and afterwards looked his countrymen in the face.¹²⁰

At the same time, like Truman, the Secretary of War recognized that using the bomb against civilian populations was a terrible moral responsibility. Stimson had always championed morality and international law, and throughout his career, he had insisted that wars be fought within the bounds of humanitarian concerns. On June 1, 1945, for example, he had questioned air force commanders

¹¹⁹ Stimson and Bundy, 630.

¹²⁰ Stimson and Bundy, 631–32.

about whether indiscriminate bombing was really necessary. Stimson had always believed that bombing could be restricted to legitimate military targets but, as the bombing against Japan progressed, he worried that he had been misled by the claims of precision bombing. With the firebombing of Japan, Stimson was condoning the kind of total war that he had always criticized, “and in recommending the use of the atomic bomb he was implicitly confessing that there could be no significant limits to the horror of modern war.” Nevertheless, Stimson averred that victory took precedence as the supreme moral consideration. “The decision was not difficult, in 1945,” he wrote, “for peace with victory was a prize that outweighed the payment demanded.”¹²¹ Victory was worth the cost.

Since his memoirs were published in peacetime, Stimson was aware that what he had written in defense of the atomic bomb and the defeat of Japan “may have a harsh and unfeeling sound.” He admitted, “It would perhaps be possible to say the same things and say them more gently. But I do not think it would be wise.” For Stimson, unconditional surrender and unlimited war were justified. He lamented that the atomic bombs had been evil and necessary and that he had played a necessary role in their use, but he asserted that the bombs were nevertheless warranted. The old statesman concluded eloquently:

As I look back over the five years of my service as Secretary of War, I see too many stern and heart-rending decisions to be willing to pretend that war is anything else than what it is. The face of war is the face of death; death is an inevitable part of every order that a wartime leader gives. The decision to use the atomic bomb was a decision that brought death to over a hundred thousand Japanese. No explanation can change that fact and I do not wish to gloss it over. But this deliberate, premeditated destruction was our least abhorrent choice. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki put an end to the Japanese war. It stopped the fire raids, and the strangling blockade, it ended the ghastly specter of a clash of great land armies. In this last great action of the Second World War we were given final proof that war is death. War in the twentieth century has grown steadily more barbarous, more destructive, more debased in all its aspects. Now with the release of atomic energy, man’s ability to destroy himself is very nearly complete. The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended a war. They also made it wholly clear that we must never have another war. This is the

¹²¹ Stimson and Bundy, 632–33.

lesson men and leaders everywhere must learn, and I believe that when they learn it they will find a way to lasting peace. There is no other choice.¹²²

Stimson reserved his severest criticism for war itself which, he claimed, was merely a form of death and he confessed that he had been death's handmaid as U.S. Secretary of War for five years. But even though death was inevitable in war, Stimson retained no illusions about the awfulness of war and insisted that the atomic bombs were abhorrent. But however destructive, premeditated, and deliberate the atomic attacks were, he insisted that, in the context of 1945, the bombs were the least evil choice. The bombs had won the war but Stimson hoped they would never be necessary again.

Thus, in 1945, the United States' supreme objective was to win the war, regardless of the cost. Total victory was more important than saving American lives, shortening the war, or not using nuclear weapons. Accordingly, the United States achieved total victory over Germany and Japan by waging an unlimited war. The U.S. won World War II because it was willing to be as ruthless as its enemies and pursued victory at all costs. Despite Truman and Stimson's moral restraint, the United States defeated its enemies by choosing to become the beast that it sought to slay. The miracle of the atomic bomb was that it empowered the U.S. to take a shortcut to total victory without sacrificing the time and lives it otherwise would have required.

On August 6, 1945, a German Jesuit priest named P. Siemes witnessed the bombing of Hiroshima. "Where the city stood, there is a gigantic burned-out scar... everything, as far as the eye could reach, is a waste of ashes and ruin," he wrote. In the days after the attack, he and his brothers discussed the ethics of the bomb. "How many people were a sacrifice to this bomb?" Siemes asked. Some priests considered the atomic bomb like poison gas and opposed its use. Others argued that the bomb was justified by total war. In the current war, they claimed, "there was no difference between civilians and soldiers, and that the bomb itself was an effective force tending to end the

¹²² Stimson and Bundy, 633.

bloodshed, warning Japan to surrender and thus to avoid total destruction.” Siemes tended to agree that one could not separate unlimited war from the costs and casualties it required. “It seems logical to me that he who supports total war in principle cannot complain of a war against civilians,” he reasoned. Nevertheless, he questioned whether unlimited war was justified and whether it was possible and moral to do good by doing evil: “The crux of the matter is whether total war in its present form is justifiable, even when it serves a just purpose. Does it not have material and spiritual evil as its consequences which far exceed whatever the good that might result? When will our moralists give us a clear answer to this question?”¹²³

¹²³ Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima: Eyewitness Account of P. Siemes, 1945; Purdy, Alfred – How Would World War II Have Ended (If the Atomic Bomb Had Not Been Used), Box 1, ABC, HSTPL.

Part II. Substitutes for Victory: Containment and Limited War in the Korean War, 1950-1953

THE DECISION TO INTERVENE

At 4 AM on the morning of June 25, 1950, the Korean People's Army (KPA) of North Korea crossed the 38th Parallel and invaded the Republic of Korea (ROK) while amphibious landings took place on the eastern coast. The radio at Pyongyang justified the invasion by falsely claiming that the ROK had launched a surprise attack across the border and that North Korean forces were resisting the attack, but the invasion was really an attempt by North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung to reunify the country under communist control. The Korean peninsula had not been fully independent or united for forty years. In 1910, Korea had been occupied by Japan as a Japanese colony and had furnished raw materials and manufactured products for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere as the Japanese military conquered areas of China, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific during the 1930s and 1940s. After the end of World War II, Korea was liberated from Japanese rule in accordance with the Cairo Declaration. To facilitate the Japanese surrender in Korea, the peninsula was divided at the 38th Parallel into American and Soviet zones which soon developed their own governments – communism in North Korea and anti-communism in South Korea. Tensions between the two sides had simmered for years but, although U.S. officials had recognized the risks of a civil war in Korea, General Douglas MacArthur and Secretary of State Dean Acheson both excluded Korea from U.S. defense commitments in the eighteen months leading up to North Korea's invasion.¹ Satisfied that the United States would not defend the Republic of Korea, North Korean communists launched an invasion to reunify the peninsula.

¹ Remarks by Dean Acheson Before the National Press Club, January 12, 1950; Harry S. Truman Administration, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

The Korean conflict marked the first time that the Cold War had turned hot and the Truman administration viewed Korea as its first real test of military containment. The United States immediately called for a special session of the United Nations Security Council to consider the situation and, that afternoon, the Council approved a decision (9-0) that denounced the attack on the ROK as a breach of the peace and called for an immediate end to hostilities.² After learning of the invasion at home in Independence, Missouri, President Truman immediately flew to Washington. That night, he invited fourteen civilian and military advisors to have dinner with him at the Blair House in and discuss what to do about Korea. The advisors included six officials from the State Department and eight from the Pentagon comprising the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the four military service secretaries. After the meal, the executive leaders of the United States talked about what to do and how far the U.S. should go in response to North Korea's invasion. Truman asked Secretary of State Dean Acheson to lead off.

Everyone agreed that the U.S. had to do something. Acheson recommended that General MacArthur, who was still overseeing the occupation of Japan as virtual Shogun, be authorized to supply Korea with arms and equipment. He also recommended that U.S. aircraft evacuate American personnel, cover the Koreans fleeing Seoul and knock out the North Korean aircraft and tanks that were inhibiting the evacuation while the Seventh Fleet – the most powerful naval force in the world – kept Formosa and the mainland at arm's length and prevented each one from attacking the other. General Omar Bradley, the chairman of the JCS, affirmed that the U.S. had to draw the line somewhere and Korea offered as good a place as any. Admiral Forrest P. Sherman likewise regarded Korea as a critical opportunity for U.S. action and Air Force General Hoyt S. Vandenberg agreed

² State Department Overview of Korean Situation, June 28, 1950; Harry S. Truman Administration File, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

that the U.S. had to stop North Korea. The secretaries concurred that the U.S. needed to act and quickly. Truman agreed. The U.S. needed to draw the line.³

In discussing how far the U.S. should go to hold the line, however, the conversation introduced many of the strategic, military, and moral concerns that would come to characterize the Korean War. Later, U.S. officials and historians would learn that North Korean leaders had decided to invade unilaterally, without direct orders from Moscow or Peking, but at the Blair House that night there was a unanimous agreement that the Soviet Union was behind the invasion since the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in North Korea was merely a Soviet satellite.⁴ Soviet involvement made American intervention risky, though. As united as they were about the role of the USSR and the need for U.S. action, there was widespread uncertainty about what the Russians would do, and no one looked forward to a war with the Soviet Union. Several military officials took a strong stance, nonetheless. Admiral Sherman did not think the Russians wanted war right now, but if they did then they would have it, he said. On the other hand, General Vandenberg did not want to base U.S. actions on the assumption that the USSR would not fight, and he worried about whether Russian jets might join the action from nearby bases. When Truman asked whether the U.S. could knock out Soviet air bases in the Far East, Vandenberg replied that it would take time, but the Air Force could do it if it used atomic bombs. Meanwhile, Secretary of the Air Force Thomas K. Finletter believed U.S. forces were sufficient to respond to the Korean problem as long as the Soviets did not join the fight and he thought the U.S. should go as far as necessary to protect the evacuation. In fact, as he compared the situation to Europe between the two world wars, Finletter felt MacArthur should be authorized to go beyond evacuation. The U.S., he concluded should take

³ Philip C. Jessup, Memo of Conversation, June 25, 1950; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

⁴ D. Clayton James and Anne Sharp Wells, *Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 133, 143.

calculated risks and hope that their actions would keep the peace. Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson agreed. However, many of the officials hesitated to put American boots on the ground. General Bradley and Secretary of the Army Frank Pace questioned whether the U.S. should commit ground units in Korea while Secretary Johnson opposed sending American soldiers.⁵

President Truman made some decisions. Although he was not ready to name MacArthur Commander-in-Chief in Korea, he decided to order the general to send suggested supplies to the Koreans and a survey group to Korea.⁶ Some elements of the U.S. fleet were to head for Japan while the Air Force should prepare plans “to wipe out all Soviet air bases in the Far East.” The State and Defense Departments were to calculate the next probable place where Soviet action might occur, and State should prepare a speech for the President to deliver in person to Congress in order to explain exactly what steps the U.S. had taken in Korea. Lastly, Truman stressed that the U.S. was working for the United Nations, and he specified that U.S. actions would be confined to Korea and the United Nations.⁷

The following evening, the President met with the same group of advisors at the Blair House to discuss the Korean situation further.⁸ General Vandenberg immediately reported that the first Yak plane had been shot down and Truman remarked that he hoped it would not be the last. So far though, the Air Force had avoided combat and focused only on carrying out its protective mission in South Korea. Secretary Acheson then suggested that the Navy and Air Force be given an “all-out

⁵ Philip C. Jessup, Memo of Conversation, June 25, 1950; SOSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

⁶ Army Chief of Staff J. Lawton Collins had informed everyone that MacArthur was already sending equipment and supplies to Korea, but the others seemed not to appreciate that the general had acted independently and without prior authorization of the President. The first military action by the United States was thus taken on MacArthur’s initiative, not on orders from Washington, a significant portent of later events. See Note by George Elsey Regarding General Douglas MacArthur, June 25, 1950; Harry S. Truman Administration File, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

⁷ Philip C. Jessup, Memo of Conversation, June 25, 1950; SOSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

⁸ Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews arrived just after the meeting adjourned.

order” south of the 38th Parallel and “waive all restrictions on their operations.” The President agreed but the group quickly clarified that U.S. aircraft were not to cross over the border with North Korea and the President confirmed that no action should take place north of the 38th Parallel, “not yet,” he added. General J. Lawton Collins, the Army Chief of Staff, observed that the situation in Korea was bad and he worried whether the Air Force would be able to do enough there. Acheson replied that it was important for the U.S. to do something, even if the effort was unsuccessful. Even if the U.S. lost Korea, Secretary Johnson added, U.S. actions would save the situation. With a mixture of sadness and resolve, President Truman stated that he had done everything in his power for the last five years to prevent this kind of situation but, now it was here, and they had to do what they could to meet it. Nevertheless, he felt reluctant to send American soldiers to Korea, “I don’t want to go to war,” the President announced.⁹

Even though Truman did not want to go to war, however, he felt that the U.S. had to stand up to aggression to prevent communism from taking over the world. After the meeting at the Blair House ended, George Elsey stuck around to talk with Truman about the significance of Korea. Elsey expressed concerns about Formosa but the President walked over to the globe standing in front of the fireplace and said he was more worried about other parts of the world, especially the Middle East. Placing his finger on Iran, Truman said, “Here is where they will start trouble if we aren’t careful.” He continued: “Korea is the Greece of the Far East. If we are tough enough now, if we stand up to them like we did in Greece three years ago, they won’t take any next steps. But if we just stand by, they’ll move into Iran and they’ll take over the whole Middle East. There’s no telling what they’ll do, if we don’t put up a fight now.”¹⁰

⁹ Philip C. Jessup, Memo of Conversation, June 26, 1950; SOSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

¹⁰ George M. Elsey Notes of June 26, 1950; Korea-June 26, 1950, Box 59, Subject File, 1916-1995, GMEP, HSTPL

On June 29, with recommendations from the Secretary of Defense and the JCS, Truman authorized General MacArthur to use military force in Korea. In their directive, the JCS instructed MacArthur to employ limited U.S. ground units to support South Korean forces, secure the port of Pusan and surrounding air bases, and “clear South Korea of North Korean forces.” He was also to defend Formosa against attacks from communist China and ensure that Formosa did not attack the Chinese mainland. The JCS also authorized the general to extend operations into North Korea if it was necessary to fulfill his mission or save American lives.¹¹ But they permitted MacArthur to attack “purely military targets” only and advised him to “stay well clear of the frontiers of Manchuria or the Soviet Union.” The JCS clarified as well that the decision to commit U.S. forces and go to war in Korea was not “a decision to engage in war with the Soviet Union.” The Chiefs fully understood the risks involved, however, and instructed MacArthur that if the USSR became involved, the general should defend his forces, avoid aggravating the situation, and report it to Washington.¹²

After midnight, MacArthur’s report on the conditions in South Korea reached Washington. He claimed that South Korean forces were incapable of stopping the invasion and recommended that American ground forces be deployed immediately. Truman therefore approved the use of one regimental combat team early on June 30 but, after meeting in the Cabinet Room with Acheson, Johnson, the JCS, the service secretaries and a few other officials, Truman gave MacArthur complete authority to use the forces under his command. He also approved a naval blockade of the Korean coast but advised MacArthur again to “keep well clear of the coastal waters of Manchuria and USSR.”¹³

¹¹ Army Department Teletype Conference, undated; NAF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

¹² Army Department Message, Joint Chiefs of Staff to Douglas MacArthur, June 29, 1950; Harry S. Truman Administration File, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL; James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 143.

¹³ Army Department Message, Joint Chiefs of Staff to Douglas MacArthur, July 1, 1950; Harry S. Truman Administration File, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL; James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 143-144.

Truman did not think he needed Congressional approval for his decisions, but he did want Congressional support.¹⁴ So, the next morning, on June 27, the President invited fifteen Congressional leaders to join another meeting in the Cabinet Room to discuss the situation in Korea and inform them about the decisions he had made. Acheson quickly summarized the events and then the President explained the thinking behind his decisions. The United States had to do something, he insisted. The communist invasion of South Korea was obviously inspired by the Soviet Union and if the U.S. let Korea down, the Soviets would continue to “swallow up one piece of Asia after another.” The United States had to make a stand “or else let all of Asia go by the board.” If Asia fell to communism, the Near East would fall too and there was “no telling what would happen in Europe.” Therefore, Truman concluded, he had ordered U.S. forces “to support Korea as long as we could – or as long as the Koreans put up a fight” and gave the U.S. something to support.¹⁵

Thus, while U.S. leaders were determined to act and hold the line against communist aggression, their responses fell short of all-out war and Truman, Acheson, and the JCS all implemented restrictions and provisos that constrained U.S. actions. Insofar as Korea looked like World War II, U.S. strategists tended toward total war. Lacking a full understanding of Korea’s internal politics, they saw North Korea’s invasion only as naked aggression directed by monolithic communism, and Soviet expansion in East Asia in 1950 looked very much to them like Nazi expansion in Eastern Europe in 1938-1939. Faced with totalitarian aggression, U.S. strategists knew that appeasement would not work against Stalin and communism any more than it had worked with Germany, Italy, and Japan and so they decided to resist.¹⁶ Their experiences in World War II also

¹⁴ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 145.

¹⁵ Notes Regarding Meeting With Congressional Leaders, June 27, 1950; Harry S. Truman Administration File, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

¹⁶ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 145–46.

gave U.S. strategists confidence in American air power and Acheson wanted to waive any restrictions and let the Air Force fight an all-out war while Truman had ordered the Air Force to make plans to destroy Soviet air bases in East Asia. Air Force officials, similarly flushed with the success of strategic bombing and atomic bombing in World War II, raised the specter of using atomic bombs against Russia on the first day of the war.

But when they looked at the specter of World War III, U.S. strategists restrained their policies and for every aggressive action they took there was an equal and opposite constraint. Hence, although his administration had resolved to do something, President Truman was equally determined to act within the constraints of the United Nations and while U.S. strategists felt impelled by military necessity to use force, the President and other officials had expressed reluctance to send American troops into combat. Moreover, Acheson had called for all-out air war, but only in South Korea. All operations in the north were initially forbidden. Then, when the Air Force was authorized to attack military targets above the 38th Parallel, they were still to stay away from the borders with China and the Soviet Union. Indeed, all operations were to keep their distance from the Soviet and Manchurian frontiers. No one could forecast the actions of the enigmatic Russians, but American officials were wary of war against them and committed to avoid provoking Soviet involvement if possible.

Accordingly, on the day of North Korea's invasion, the National Security Council issued NSC Report 76 which outlined American courses of action in the event Soviet forces joined the Korean War. If Soviet units entered or indicated their intention to enter the war (a determination to be made by the President alone), the report recommended that the U.S. initiate "full-scale mobilization" immediately. If the USSR joined the war *and* carried out aggression somewhere else too, the report proposed that the U.S. participate in "UN retaliation against Soviet Russia to the

limit of war plans for United States forces.” If Soviet action was confined to Korea, the U.S. could try to localize the fighting as much as possible but, in sum, Russian military involvement in Korea would likely mean a general war between the Soviet Union and the United States.¹⁷

Thus, while Truman and his advisors were committed to containing communism they were also, perhaps equally, committed to containing the war. Every decision that the Truman administration made in Korea was weighed against, and ultimately constrained by, the fear of a wider or general war that could easily turn into another world or nuclear war. In a handwritten note from June 30, Truman mentioned that Chiang Kai-Shek and the Chinese nationalists had offered two military divisions to use in Korea. Truman recorded, “we probably should use the Chinese ground forces,” but he wondered how that would affect Mao Zedong and the communists on the mainland – “Must be careful not to cause a general Asiatic war,” he wrote.¹⁸

From day one, therefore, the Korean War was already showing signs that it would not grow up to be like its predecessors. While it was still too early to declare definitively what U.S. objectives would be and what victory would mean, the Truman administration had already shown an unwillingness to pursue total war in the name of total victory. From the beginning, then, U.S. responses to the Korean conflict showed that the Korean War could be a different kind of war – a limited war.

CONTAINMENT AND LIMITED WAR IN KOREA

In the thirty-year reversal in U.S. foreign policy from victory at all costs to peace at any price, the Korean War proved to be the turning point. Initially, the United States intervened in Korea in

¹⁷ NSC Report 76/1, “U.S. Courses of Action in the Event Soviet Forces Enter Korean Hostilities,” July 25, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

¹⁸ Handwritten Note by Harry S. Truman, June 30, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

order to save the Republic of Korea (ROK) and contain communist aggression. While American leaders, advisors, and commanders contemplated unlimited war, nuclear weapons, and all of the means that had made total victory possible in World War II, Dean Acheson and the State Department wanted to avoid a wider war with China and the Soviet Union that could turn into another world war or a nuclear war and so they aimed to contain the conflict in Korea as much as they aimed to contain communism. After rescuing South Korea, the United States succumbed to the temptation to liberate North Korea and U.S. strategists altered their ends and means. Thus, in October 1950, U.S. forces fought the Korean War by replaying World War II and applying the same attitudes, values, and ethics against communism that it had against Germany and Japan. The United States waged an unlimited war against North Korea and demanded the unconditional surrender of its forces in order to liberate, unify, and democratize the Korean peninsula. After China intervened in late October and November, however, U.S. strategists turned away from the attitudes, values, and ethics that had characterized the Second World War. Fearing that an enlarged war with China could turn into a world war or nuclear war, the United States limited and localized the war to prevent the Korean conflict from escalating and expanding into World War III. Instead of fighting an unlimited war to achieve unconditional surrender and total victory, therefore, the U.S. fought a limited war to contain communism and achieve peace with honor. Through the Korean War, the United States thus transitioned from unlimited war to limited war, and from unconditional surrender to an armistice. The war that had once born the attributes of World War II, and could have matured into World War III, instead grew into a conflict carrying the traits Americans would come to associate with the Vietnam War.

When war first broke out in June 1950 and North Korea invaded South Korea, the United States intervened to contain communist aggression and prevent South Korea and the whole of East Asia from falling under communist domination. If they did not resist aggression, U.S. strategists

believed, communism would continue to gobble up territory just like Hitler had in Europe which would lead to another world war. But U.S. strategists also worried that the Korean conflict itself could become a third world war if the war expanded to include China and the Soviet Union. Thus, while D. Clayton James has argued that the U.S. “refought” the Second World War and renewed all of the strategies that had won World War II, I maintain that U.S. strategists still exhibited restrained attitudes and values about Korea from June to October. When the war began, for example, the Truman administration was reluctant even to call it such. When Truman and Acheson sent American soldiers to Korea, the President labeled it a “police action” because a “war” would require Congressional approval and the goal, of course, was to punish and contain aggression, not to defeat or overthrow it. By calling Korea a “police action,” Truman also showed the communists that the U.S. was not waging a total war for either survival or victory and it did not require total mobilization or unlimited efforts.¹⁹ Even as U.S. and UN forces turned the tide against North Korea and pushed KPA armies back in September, the ground war was still restricted to southern Korea and the U.S. fought to restore the status quo antebellum, not to liberate the entire peninsula. By stopping communist advances in Korea, the administration certainly hoped to prevent aggression from causing another world war, but the administration was equally anxious to prevent the war already underway from becoming another world war as well. Indeed, I argue that Truman and his advisors limited operations to restore the status quo antebellum on the Korean peninsula during the summer and early fall of 1950 and rejected unlimited and preventive war in order to both contain aggression and contain the conflict.

Once UN forces had repelled communist attacks and restored the status quo antebellum, however, U.S. strategists had to decide whether to cross the 38th Parallel and liberate North Korea or

¹⁹ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 242.

maintain only South Korea's independence and sovereignty. Crossing the parallel would start a new phase of the war, cost more lives, and risk expanding and escalating the conflict. But the Truman administration ultimately accepted those risks and costs because of the temptations and pressure of military necessity, the prospect of total victory, UN objectives, U.S. assessments, and South Korean lobbying. U.S. strategists had begun to contemplate a crusade for liberation in September and, on October 1, 1950, allied forces expanded the ground war into North Korea, replacing containment with rollback. Thereafter, as James writes, the United States sought the "annihilation of the enemy army, total war, decisive victory, and unconditional capitulation."²⁰ U.S. forces fought an unlimited war, bombed northern cities, and demanded the unconditional surrender of North Korean forces in order to liberate, unify, and democratize Korea.

As UN forces advanced northward and approached North Korea's border with China along the Yalu River, China invaded North Korea. China's offensives on October 25 and November 25 changed American calculations of what was moral and what was possible in Korea and U.S. strategists debated whether the U.S. should fight a total or unlimited war for total victory, a limited war for limited victory, or withdraw to fight another day. Some strategists wanted to achieve total victory by rolling back communism and defeating Chinese forces. They called for the U.S. to expand and escalate the war at the risk of a general or world war on the Asian mainland. Others wanted to restrict U.S. operations and sacrifice decisive victory in order to save American lives and preserve some portion of Korea. Some wanted the U.S. to withdraw altogether and de-escalate the war. They risked a humiliating defeat for the United States in order to save American lives, avoid a general war, and prepare for the next communist aggression. Overall, though, war with China forced the Truman administration to reevaluate the costs and benefits of total war and total victory and the

²⁰ James and Wells, xii.

administration ultimately chose to limit U.S. operations to avoid provoking a world war or nuclear war. U.S. strategists were slow to give up their crusade and relinquish their goals, however. Unsure about China's intentions and conflicted about their own objectives, U.S. strategists continued to limit and localize the war while still fighting for liberation.

General Douglas MacArthur and other strategists criticized the administration's ambiguous objectives, the idea of limited war, and the stalemate that U.S. strategies had produced. MacArthur contended that China's intervention had not modified American goals and that the only thing that the United States had to change was how far it was willing to go to win. Instead of fighting a limited war, therefore, the general called for the U.S. to un-limit the war by escalating and expanding the conflict against mainland China. Truman, of course, wanted to limit and localize the war to avoid provoking the USSR and prevent World War III. The debate over limited and unlimited war – and the values and costs each represented – culminated in a showdown between the general and the president in the spring of 1951. MacArthur insisted that force had to be opposed with maximum counterforce and that there was no substitute for victory. On the other hand, Truman argued that containment did not require maximum force and he accepted the re-establishment of the status quo antebellum rather than take on the intolerable costs of another world war. The President ultimately outranked the general and, backed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he fired MacArthur and banished the notion of an unlimited war against China.

Thereafter, the Korean War remained limited and localized as the U.S. and China both restrained their operations. As James wrote, "Gradually there developed in both camps of belligerents unspoken and unwritten agreements, usually for wholly different reasons, to place significant restraints on their own conduct of ground, sea, and air operations." While World War II was largely fought without restrictions, on all sides, the Korean War was waged "with a unique and

complex set of restrictions that precluded its escalation into a general war.”²¹ By localizing the conflict, limiting the air war, and rejecting nuclear weapons, the Truman administration held the line against communism and preserved the Republic of Korea, but it also substituted containment for victory and led to a stalemate. In July 1953, the United States signed an armistice that preserved the status quo antebellum and ended the war. The United States had contained communism, avoided a third world war, and achieved peace with honor. However, the Korean War ended in a stalemate, not a victory, but Americans accepted the results because they valued victory less, valued American lives more, and thus lost the will to exact and endure the costs necessary to win.

I argue, therefore, that the United States ultimately substituted containment, limited war, and peace with honor in place of total victory, unlimited war, and unconditional surrender because U.S. strategists and the American public believed that total victory was immoral and impossible. U.S. strategists still valued victory, in fact, their experiences and memories of World War II impelled them to pursue total victory over communism and the Soviet Union. But the prospective costs of a third world war and a nuclear war ultimately changed their attitudes and morals and led them to pursue containment and limited war in Korea.

Initially, however, the United States approached Korea as it had World War II. “Due to their training and experience, the civilian and military leadership of the United States was especially prone to see the Korean emergency from the perspective of the 1939-1945 ordeal,” James noted. Seemingly everything in the current war had a historical analogy in the previous war. The Soviet Union was like Nazi Germany, a totalitarian dictatorship bent on world domination. Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin assumed the role of Nazi Fuhrer Adolf Hitler. And when North Korea, a satellite for the Soviet Union, invaded their southern neighbor, South Korea took the place of Poland. Coming

²¹ James and Wells, xii, 1.

just five years after the end of World War II, the invasion of South Korea looked like history was repeating itself and American officials and soldiers at all levels compared their Korean experiences to those of the previous war.²² For the Truman administration which had presided over the Allies' final victory in World War II, Korea was World War III.

James observed that the U.S. used World War II tactics like strategic air power to destroy North Korea's capacity to make war and seal off the peninsula from the mainland. U.S. forces even re-used the same weapons from World War II. Aside from jet fighters and helicopters, most of the American equipment in Korea was 1945 vintage.²³ But the most important remnants that the United States repurposed from World War II in Korea was its thinking – its attitudes, values, and ethics about war.

World War II had seemingly proved, for example, the efficacy and necessity of total victory. The experience of Munich, which encapsulated all of the diplomatic attempts to dissuade Hitler from annexing and absorbing more territory in Europe into the Third Reich, failed miserably. Munich showed that appeasement did not work. Indeed, American officials, like their Western counterparts, concluded that dictators and totalitarian or militaristic regimes could not be appeased, and that appeasement simply led to world war. Applying the lesson to Stalin and the Soviet Union, U.S. strategists believed that the Kremlin could not be appeased and that the United States needed to resist communist aggression forcibly. Indeed, U.S. strategists believed they needed to use overwhelming force.

Germany and Japan had also refused to surrender and so World War II taught not only that appeasement did not work but that total victory was the only thing that did. Germany and Japan had

²² James and Wells, 1–2.

²³ James and Wells, 2–4.

to be defeated decisively and completely – all the way to the Reich Chancellery and the Reichstag in Berlin in the case of Germany, and all the way to the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the case of Japan. Total victory was the only way to ensure that there was no risk that irredentism, nationalism, or militarism could revive and threaten world peace again. Against communism, U.S. strategists similarly believed that the only way to stop aggression was to defeat and destroy it – until Korea.

U.S. strategists also felt compelled to pursue total victory against communism and the Soviet Union because they felt that their victory in World War II had been undermined by Stalin's cunning and betrayed by Anglo-American spinelessness. The United States may have won the war, but many officials believed it had lost the peace. Republicans, in particular, criticized Roosevelt, Truman, and the Democrats for having given away America's victory birthright to the Soviets at Yalta and many Americans felt that divisions in Germany, Korea, and Indochina had forfeited and compromised their spoils and laid the groundwork for another world war. By totally defeating the Soviet Union, therefore, the United States could reclaim the victories it had lost or abdicated in World War II and could ensure this time, and for all time, that communism and totalitarianism would never again threaten America's national security and world peace.

To achieve total victory, North Korea was also demoralized and dehumanized just as the Japanese had been in World War II. American reports quickly resuscitated the anti-Asian racism that had lain dormant for five years and depicted North Koreans as subhuman savages who committed horrendous atrocities. The Truman administration also revitalized the World War II rhetoric of democracy versus tyranny, freedom against slavery, and good versus evil.²⁴

²⁴ James and Wells, 5.

American experiences in World War II cut both ways, however. Despite the justifications for total victory, U.S. strategists were also encouraged to limit their aims because of the costs that victory would require. The Second World War had been the worst war in human history and, even though the United States emerged relatively unscathed, the victories of the war had been tempered by its costs. The world vowed never to forget or repeat the Second World War. Another world war – and just five years after the last one – seemed absolutely intolerable and U.S. strategists felt determined to avoid a wider or general war that could expand into a third world war.

Another world war was also intolerable because it would likely become a nuclear war. By fighting a total war for total victory in World War II, the United States had opened the nuclear Pandora's box and U.S. strategists assumed that the United States would use nuclear weapons in subsequent wars. Their willingness to use them diminished though, after the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb in August 1949 and developed its own nuclear weapons. Now that the Soviets had the bomb too, any war against the USSR and communism would likely escalate into a nuclear war which would make the costs and destruction of World War II seem minor by comparison. Since both sides would have stockpiles of bombs, the costs of conflict would be so high as to destroy the very concept of victory. What possible purpose or benefit could victory serve in a war where most major cities and populations on both sides were wiped out? How could anyone plan or hope to win a nuclear war? The atomic or nuclear revolution thus transformed not only technology and military strategy, but morality as well and U.S. strategists rejected total victory and total war because the costs were unbearable.

U.S. strategists also devalued victory because of the type of threat that communism and the Soviet Union posed. As George Kennan had argued, victory over the USSR and international communism was impossible – at least in the ways that U.S. strategists had traditionally thought of

victory. The Soviets did not typically wage a conventional conflict to capture or conquer territory. Instead, they relied on more subtle forms of attack such as infiltration, subversion, and propaganda. Conventional victories on the battlefield – decisive and quick – were therefore impossible, and Kennan had called for new strategies and new ethics in the Cold War against Russia. Rather than confronting communism head on in pitched battles, Kennan suggested that the United States try to contain communism abroad and shore up its political and economic institutions at home. Of necessity then, the United States would have to wage a long informal war and diligently and vigilantly defend against communist attacks at every turn. Thus, while the U.S. would still need to prepare for war and maintain its military strength, it also had to be prepared to fight long inconclusive political and diplomatic battles without it. Traditional conceptions of victory, therefore, would not succeed against the Soviet Union and international communism.

If the United States defined victory differently or valued it less in Korea, and showed greater concern for American lives, it was partly because national values, attitudes, and ethics followed bureaucratic politics. As Kennan's influence demonstrated during the early years of the Cold War, the State Department, with its army of diplomats, ambassadors, and foreign policy experts, came to dominate American grand strategy after 1945. In Korea, therefore, civilian officials had much more influence over policy and, as a result, the U.S. military did not make all of the military decisions. The State Department, led by Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and the Policy Planning Staff, heavily influenced military policy, strategy, and even operations and directed much more of the Korean War than they had in World War II.²⁵ The Secretary of State decided the U.S. should intervene in Korea and authorized MacArthur to cross the 38th Parallel and liberate North Korea. The President simply concurred with or followed Acheson's lead.²⁶ The fact that State governed foreign policy and grand

²⁵ James and Wells, xi.

²⁶ James and Wells, 14–16; Cumings, *The Korean War*, 12.

strategy in Korea would not have mattered so much if State and Defense had been on the same page, but the truth was that State officials were far more concerned about the risks and casualties of a wider war than the Pentagon, the JCS, and military field commanders. In other words, Acheson and the State Department were more prone to fight a limited war for limited ends because they wanted to avoid a world war and save American lives and they therefore believed more readily that total victory was immoral and impossible.

The lack of progress in Korea likewise convinced the country at large that victory in Korea was both immoral and impossible and Americans eventually turned against the war and sued for an honorable peace. By 1951, combat had stabilized and stagnated around the peninsula's waist and, since the United States could not defeat China without expanding and escalating the war into another world war or nuclear war, U.S. strategists determined to limit and localize the war and committed to restoring the status quo antebellum. The United States was used to the American way of war, however – decisive and quick wars featuring all-out efforts to annihilate the enemy and force their unconditional surrender – but the Truman administration deliberately limited U.S. operations. However necessary, limited war frustrated Americans because it was indecisive, slow, and still costly. Americans were also used to winning – defeating Germany and Japan had been the United States' finest hour but, unlike World War II, Korea became a stalemate. Even though U.S. firepower reached comparable levels to World War II in 1951-1952, U.S. forces neither won nor lost much ground and attrition strategies turned Korea into an “indecisive killing ground without meaning.” Over time, therefore, Americans turned against the war as it became protracted, indecisive, and morally ambiguous. When the war ended, with an armistice rather than an unconditional surrender, Americans struggled to understand what had happened and why, and what, if anything, the U.S. had

“won,” and whether their intervention was worth the cost.²⁷ Thus, while the Korean War looked like World War II when it first began, it grew up and developed many of the traits that Americans would later come to associate with the Vietnam War.

REACTIONS TO U.S. INTERVENTION

After North Korea’s invasion, the White House received hundreds of letters, telegrams, and notes and the overwhelming majority favored the President’s decision to intervene. An aide calculated that the letters supported Truman’s action by ten to one and former White House Counsel Clark Clifford noted that the public approval for Truman’s decisions was “surprisingly universal.”²⁸ Whether for or against going to war in Korea, however, the mail that the White House received often used moral reasoning to support their arguments.

Against/Con

Americans who opposed U.S. intervention in Korea did so because they thought the war in Korea was unconstitutional, illegal, and immoral. For example, Senator Robert A. Taft (R-OH) argued that Truman had usurped the powers of Congress by effectively declaring war on North Korea. Taft admitted though, that the President’s foreign policy was correct and that if a resolution had been submitted asking for Congressional approval to send American soldiers to Korea, he would have voted for it.²⁹ Joseph Albaum, an attorney in Chicago, also denounced Truman’s “act of active warfare” and reminded the Chief Executive that only Congress had the authority to declare war.³⁰ Since the President had simply used his executive power as commander-in-chief and not asked

²⁷ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 7–8, 153, 155.

²⁸ William Hopkins to Charles Ross, June 29, 1950; Official File, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL; Clark M. Clifford to Harry S. Truman, June 29, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

²⁹ Harold B. Hinton, “Taft Says Truman Bypasses Congress,” *NYT*, June 29, 1950.

³⁰ Joseph Albaum to Harry S. Truman, June 30, 1950; Official File, the Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

for Congressional authorization, the decision to send American troops to Korea was unconstitutional and illegal.

Others complained that the U.S. had no business policing other people's problems and argued that killing and dying for an unnecessary cause in Korea was immoral. Ann and George Ash in New York City were horrified to read of the loss of American lives in Korea, "what are we doing there?" they asked. The Korean conflict was clearly a civil war, they asserted, and the UN Charter clearly prohibited foreign interventions in domestic disputes which meant that U.S. involvement was illegal because it violated the UN Charter. "How would we have felt had some European country sent troops to the South during our own Civil War?" Moreover, they argued, South Korean President Syngman Rhee did not even have the support of his own party since he had not won a majority vote in the May elections. They questioned, "Must we pull his chestnuts out of the fire for him? The Koreans don't want him. Why should we?" They insisted that the U.S. withdraw its forces immediately and allow the Koreans to decide their future for themselves.³¹

Mr. and Mrs. Wylie G. Akenson from Chicago similarly urged "caution and restraint in dealing with [the] Korean situation." It was very important, they wrote, to stay out of wars and "foreign entanglement." War with the Soviet Union was not inevitable, they claimed. Alexander the Great and Napoleon could not hold their empires together and neither would Joe Stalin. They therefore pleaded with the President not to drag 157 million Americans into "another Asiatic war" which could end American liberty and introduce totalitarianism. "No 157 million times no," they declared.³²

³¹ Ann and George Ash to Harry S. Truman, July 12, 1950; Official File, the Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

³² Mr. and Mrs. Wylie Akenson to Harry S. Truman, July 12, 1950; Official File, the Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

Others argued for diplomacy before violence and peace instead of war. Carolyn Aquino from Oak Park, Illinois wrote:

In the name of all those who are signing the peace petitions all over the country, I beg of you to reconsider the sending of arms, munitions, or any other aid to Korea. The war they are fighting is a civil war, not an international one. They are fighting for unity in a country where there has been none. The world has not yet rebuilt its ruins of but a few short 5 years past. Must we spend more time in rebuilding ruins that should never have been made ruins. Let us talk before we fight. Let us negotiate before we use knuckles.³³

Many critics of U.S. foreign policy, therefore, argued strongly that the war in Korea was immoral and not worth the cost. Their concerns for American lives and world peace outweighed any considerations of victory over communism.

For/Pro

Most Americans approved of Truman's decision, however, and many of them did so publicly on moral grounds. Supporters thought war in Korea was a strategic necessity in order to preserve U.S. national security; others believed communism was evil and, therefore, that anti-communism was good. Overall, though, Americans supported containment because they trusted in its moral foundations.

Truman's great rival from the 1948 presidential election, New York Governor Thomas Dewey, whom Truman had famously upset, telegraphed his support for the President's action. As the nominal head of the Republican Party, Dewey nonetheless set aside his politics at the water's edge and called on Republicans to back Truman. He affirmed that the President's decision was necessary for U.S. national security and "should be supported by a united America."³⁴ Meanwhile, Mary Whitman from Winnetka, Illinois, commended Truman's "quick reaction to the North Korean

³³ Carolyn Aquino to Harry S. Truman, June 28, 1950; Official File, the Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

³⁴ "Dewey Supports Action By Truman," *NYT*, June 28, 1950.

aggression” and called for “complete mobilization” in order “to win in Korea as soon as possible, and to deter the Russians from attacking anywhere else in the world.”³⁵

In one especially eloquent letter, George W. Constable, a lawyer from Baltimore, thanked the President for his honorable decision in Korea. “I have never voted for you in the past. I may never do so in the future,” he confessed, “Nevertheless, as an American citizen, I wish to express my profound gratitude for the decision you took on our behalf to go to the aid of the South Koreans.” Constable regarded the war as a noble cause – not a crusade against communism or tyranny but a selfless act to save South Korea from destruction. He explained:

In the past we have been slowly drawn or swiftly kicked into our wars, some highly questionable. This time we not only led the way from the beginning; we led the whole world; and this in the noblest of causes. It is our blood and our wealth and our leadership that have been swiftly, steadfastly, courageously placed on the side of right... We are far from being a perfect nation; but what we have done and are doing here should purge us of many of our sins; for what we have done is truly noble.

Even if our troops had been pushed into the sea, our action would have been eternally right. By intervening in Korea, the United States was doing for another nation what it could not do for itself, he argued. In years to come, history and hindsight would make Truman’s decision easy, but Constable pointed out how the President could have made a different, easier choice, and he praised Truman for courageously accepting the risks and costs of war in order to do the right thing. He went on:

It is easy to say after the event that the decision was easy and that anyone would have done the same. This is the carping, grudging, judgment of hindsight – history has a way of never being inevitable until some later vision makes it seem so by obscuring the alternatives that might easily have come to pass. How simple it would have been to pass the buck to the U. N. in the initial crisis – each nation perhaps expressing conditional willingness, each fearing a world war, dreading the cost, hesitating – until South Korea was overrun and united action would be too late and impossible to organize. How simple to refuse to take the large risks,

³⁵ Mrs. Ronald Whitman, Jr., to Harry S. Truman with Reply From William D. Hassett, August 4, 1950; Official File, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

blurring our excuses in expressions of indignation, helplessness and threats of future retaliation – as when Hitler, and later Stalin, moved into Prague.

Your decision, and the efforts of our men in arms, have enabled us to earn as a nation in the hearts of people of good will the world over, moral capital that will serve us in good stead for years to come. May this never be forgotten amid all the criticism that may be heaped upon you for other actions. This one action alone, in my opinion, will overshadow in the books of history the demerits of a thousand lesser ones.³⁶

Although Constable lauded the virtuous outcomes that would come from America's involvement in Korea, he gave no thought to *how* the war should be fought. The ends of U.S. intervention apparently justified the means.

However noble Truman's decision to save South Koreans may have been, U.S. intervention could not save the Republic of Korea. While the United States limited its initial military response, North Korea fought a total war to decisively defeat and conquer South Korea. The government of Syngman Rhee soon fled Seoul as North Korean forces quickly advanced south and captured the capital on June 28. On the first day of the invasion, a teleconference from Tokyo noted that "There is no evidence to substantiate a belief that the north Koreans are engaged in a limited objective offensive or in a raid... the size of the North Korean Forces employed, the depth of penetration, the intensity of the attack, and the landings made miles south of the parallel on the east coast indicate that the north Koreans are engaged in an all-out offensive to subjugate South Korea."³⁷ Accordingly, in a matter of weeks, the invading armies captured Seoul, overran South Korean forces, and occupied most of the peninsula.

³⁶ Correspondence Between George W. Constable and Harry S. Truman, October 18, 1950; Official File, the Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

³⁷ Note Regarding Teleconference, June 25, 1950; Harry S. Truman Administration File, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

Police Actions

When KPA forces first crossed the 38th Parallel and invaded South Korea, John Foster Dulles, an external consultant to the State Department, and John Allison, the director of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs, telegraphed Dean Acheson and Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk. The two Johns told the two Deans that South Korean forces might be able to “contain and repulse the attack” on their own but, if they could not, U.S. forces should be used in order to preclude a more dangerous conflict. They warned, “To sit by while Korea is overrun by unprovoked armed attack would start a disastrous chain of events leading most probably to world war.”¹

U.S. strategists agreed, of course, that U.S. forces needed to contain aggression in order to prevent South Korea and, potentially, the whole of East Asia from falling under communist domination. However, they believed there were two perilous paths to world war. Dulles and Allison had identified the first: the prospect that uncontained aggression would eventually lead, as it had in World War II, to a global war between the communist world and the free world. U.S. strategists also worried though that the Korean conflict itself could turn into a world war if the fighting was not localized on the peninsula. If either side escalated the war, or if the conflict expanded to include China or the Soviet Union, the Korean War could become a third world war. Consequently, U.S. strategists attempted to walk a tightrope between the twin pitfalls ending in world war by containing aggression and containing the conflict.

¹ Telegram Extract, John Foster Dulles and John Allison to Dean Acheson and Dean Rusk, June 25, 1950; Harry S. Truman Administration File, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

BOMBING NORTH KOREAN CITIES: RASHIN, AUGUST 1950

As KPA armies swept south and threatened to conquer the peninsula, U.S. and UN ground forces fought to contain communist aggression in order to fulfill the UN mandate to restore Korean sovereignty and freedom. They were not permitted to attack North Korean territory, though. UN air forces, on the other hand, were given free rein to interdict troops and supplies coming from the north and American B-29s pummeled military targets throughout North Korea. The air war in Korea, therefore, ran the greatest risk of provoking, escalating, or expanding the conflict into a world war or nuclear war.

Early on, U.S. strategists regarded bombing North Korean cities as a strategic, military, and diplomatic issue, not a moral one. Since the U.S. Air Force (USAF) remained committed to precision bombing and attacked specific military or industrial targets in North Korea, few officials expressed any moral qualms about the bombing campaign. On August 18, 1950, however, the British Embassy raised concerns about bombing civilians in North Korea. British diplomats in Tokyo had heard that the U.S. had dropped leaflets on five cities in North Korea warning the inhabitants to evacuate because the cities were “marked for destruction.” The British Embassy worried that the USAF was planning “saturation bombing which would completely blot out the cities.” The Royal Air Force had, of course, carried out just such a campaign against German cities in World War II – and had pressured the U.S. Army Air Forces to leave their moral scruples on the runway – but now, British sentiments had changed, and they expressed grave misgivings about bombing civilians. In addition to being immoral, the British also feared that the attacks would engender anti-Western feeling in Asia and feed the communist propaganda machine giving the Soviets the chance to do more “mischief” in the UN Security Council. General Bradley and others

quickly reassured the British, however, that the Air Force was attacking military targets like marshalling yards, warehouses, and industrial plants.²

But while the bombing of North Korea was largely a military and diplomatic matter for U.S. strategists, the risk of global or nuclear war was unquestionably a moral concern. Once again, U.S. strategists were caught between the military necessity of interdicting supplies that supported North Korean armies and the diplomatic and moral necessity of avoiding provocations that could lead to Chinese or Soviet interventions. The Defense Department, headed by Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, insisted that the U.S. had to execute its military exigencies while the State Department, led by Secretary of State Dean Acheson, demanded that the U.S. adhere to its diplomatic constraints. President Truman, therefore, issued a directive that attempted to fulfill both needs. He authorized the Air Force to bomb military targets in North Korea but specified that American aircraft were to stay “well clear” of the Chinese and Soviet frontiers in Manchuria and Siberia.

In August 1950, however, the week before the British Embassy complained about bombing civilians, the State Department received news that American B-29s had bombed the North Korean port of Rashin (Najin), an important rail and shipping center for fuel supplies at the northeast tip of North Korea just seventeen miles from the Russian border. The bombers had attacked “through heavy cloud cover [and] swept over the target in three successive waves” dropping “more than 500 tons of high explosives.”³ The incident started a war of words between the State and Defense Departments which highlighted not only the bureaucratic boundaries about policymaking but the

² Philip C. Jessup Memorandum of Conversation, August 18, 1950; James E. Webb to Dean Acheson, August 18, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³ Ansel E. Talbert, “Raid on Korea Port Near Russia Is Blow To Soviet Submarines,” *New York Herald Tribune*, August 14, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

larger divisions about military and diplomatic considerations and whether the United States' first priority should be to win the Korean War or avoid World War III.

On August 12, Deputy Undersecretary of State H. Freeman Matthews confronted General Lauris Norstad, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Air Force, and told him of the concerns in the State Department. Norstad felt certain, however, that the mission had not flown over or bombed Soviet or Chinese territory because the Air Force had strict instructions not to bomb the port “except under the most favorable weather conditions when there could be no possibility of bombing Soviet or Manchurian territory through error.”⁴

Two days later, on August 14, Matthews called General Burns and emphasized the danger of bombing Rashin. The Soviets were extremely sensitive about the area and the State Department felt that any further bombing of Rashin would have “the gravest consequences.” Matthews explained, “We believe that if the Soviet authorities are undecided or are hesitating as to whether to move on a wider basis now the bombing of Rashin or similar moves might well prove an important deciding factor.”⁵ That same day, Ambassador Philip C. Jessup brought up the issue with Secretary of the Air Force Thomas K. Finletter and then Undersecretary of State James E. Webb wrote to Louis Johnson about the matter before meeting with President Truman to discuss it.⁶

The State Department became especially worried after the *New York Herald Tribune* ran a story about the raid on Rashin and after receiving an assessment from expert Kremlinologist and Russian whisperer, George F. Kennan. The article from the *Herald Tribune* implied that the bombing was not necessary for the prosecution of the war and that it was actually directed against the USSR

⁴ H. Freeman Matthews Memo, August 12, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁵ H. Freeman Matthews Memo, August 14, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁶ Philip C. Jessup, Memorandum of Conversation, August 14, 1950; James E. Webb to Louis Johnson, August 14, 1950; James E. Webb to Dean Acheson, August 14, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

and its submarine capabilities. Because the city operated as a ship refueling center and railroad terminal, the attack on Rashin was officially part of the UN interdiction program, but the article claimed that most supplies for the invasion of South Korea had passed through the city before the fighting began. Rashin was important to the Soviet Union, however, because it also connected to the Manchurian rail network and the Trans-Siberian Railroad, making Rashin “Russia’s chief transport lifeline to the Far East.” Rashin was most critical, though, as a base for Soviet naval operations. Because of its deep-water seaport, the Soviet Navy had used Rashin as a submarine base with the consent of the DPRK since all of its other ports were inaccessible. Vladivostok was icebound for much of the year and so were Petropavlovsk in southeastern Russia, Kamchatka and Nikolaevsk on the Amur River in Eastern Siberia, as were all other Russian naval bases in the Pacific except for one in the Komandorskie Islands. Meanwhile, both Dairen and Port Arthur, which Stalin had received from the Chinese nationalists after World War II, were situated on the shallow Yellow Sea, making them unsuitable as submarine bases.⁷ James Webb warned Secretary Johnson that stories like the *Herald-Tribune’s* could make it difficult to localize the conflict and “prevent the outbreak of general hostilities.” He recommended that the Defense Department issue an official statement about how the raid was directly related to the Korean War and “deny flatly that it had any other purpose or implication.”⁸

Meanwhile, George Kennan reported to Dean Acheson that Soviet leaders were probably concerned about “the proximity of the operations in Korea to their own frontiers and... the direct damage which could conceivably be done to their military interests” if hostilities extended any further. He also warned that “any further direct detriment” to the Soviet military in the Far East

⁷ Ansel E. Talbert, “Raid on Korea Port Near Russia Is Blow To Soviet Submarines,” *New York Herald Tribune*, August 14, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁸ James E. Webb to Louis Johnson, August 14, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

resulting from the war could “hasten a re-entry of the Red Army into North Korea.” Given the weather conditions, Kennan worried that the bombers might have flown over the Soviet frontier or even attacked it and, even if they hadn’t, he reminded Acheson that “Soviet authorities are pathologically sensitive even to any reconnaissance activities, let alone actual bombings, in that vicinity.” Kennan further pointed out that MacArthur’s headquarters in Korea had imposed new censorship practices several days before the incident, “making it entirely plain that the relationship of Rashin to the hostilities in South Korea was only a pretext for our bombing and that the real reason for it was the desire to injure the Soviet strategic position in the Far East.” Therefore, Kennan determined that, because the incident “can only appear to the Soviet authorities as evidence of a deliberate decision to exploit the South Korean hostilities for the purpose of reducing Soviet strategic capabilities in the area, we must be prepared at any time for extreme Soviet reactions going considerably beyond” any previous analysis. He warned that “a Soviet military re-entry into North Korea might occur at any time” and that the USSR might even put strategic bombers at North Korea’s disposal to use against U.S. forces and bases in Japan. Finally, Kennan wrote that if the USSR believed that operations in Korea were merely a pretext for reducing Soviet strategic capabilities, “even at the price of greater heightened danger of serious complications,” that would change “their estimate of the possibility of avoiding major hostilities, of the likely timing of such hostilities, and of the relative advantages of a Soviet initiation of such hostilities as opposed to a waiting policy based on the continued hope of avoiding them altogether.” In sum, Kennan seemed convinced that the bombing of Rashin would, at the very least, change the Soviet calculations about the possibility and costs of world war if it did not lead to one directly.⁹

⁹ George F. Kennan to Dean Acheson, August 14, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

The Defense Department, however, downplayed the risks of Rashin and tried to hush the State Department's wailing. Before the cabinet meeting on August 15, Louis Johnson told James Webb that State should not be worried about the bombing because it had been approved in advance by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and President Truman himself. The JCS, Johnson explained, had decided to bomb Rashin to destroy a large chemical plant which was being used to manufacture munitions for the war. Webb replied that Russian experts in the State Department took a serious view of the attack and worried that it might provoke Chinese involvement or compel the Soviets to reoccupy North Korea. Johnson remonstrated that the plant had to be destroyed, whatever State might think of it, "and that they would go back time after time to destroy it." Webb subsequently explained to Acheson: "He seemed to think that as long as planes did not cross the Russian border the exact location of targets was of little significance." Webb told Johnson that the people with "the most experience in dealing with the Russians" did not see it that way and he hoped that the Secretary would reexamine the matter and "give more attention to the concern of the Department of State about the consequence of such actions in the proximity of the Russian border."¹⁰

Reporting to Acheson, Webb doubted that the President had approved the attack in advance and thought State should make a stronger formal statement to Johnson expressing their concerns and requesting that the Defense Department consult State before making exceptions to orders "which have been issued by the President specifically directing that actions in the proximity of the Russian border be avoided."¹¹ Accordingly, Webb issued a formal statement to Johnson on August 16, expressing State's concerns. Webb reminded the Secretary of Defense that the White House had directed U.S. forces to stay "well clear" of the Manchurian and Soviet frontiers, even while bombing

¹⁰ James E. Webb to Dean Acheson, August 15, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

¹¹ James E. Webb to Dean Acheson, August 15, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

operations north of the 38th Parallel were authorized. The State Department felt, however, that bombing Rashin violated that directive and vitally affected the national security of the United States “and our basic foreign policy objective to prevent the outbreak of a general war.” The directive, which had been finalized by the JCS and State representatives, had been approved by Acheson, Johnson, and Truman, and stemmed from State’s view that the Kremlin is extremely sensitive to “any military action in this area” because they consider it to be “of vital military importance to them,” Webb wrote. The directive also grew out of both departments’ objectives to avoid direct Soviet participation in Korea. Webb quoted Kennan’s warnings about how the Soviets would perceive the bombing of Rashin and explained that the Soviets could use the bombing as a pretext for attacking American forces and bases in Japan. Webb therefore exhorted that the State Department “be consulted in advance of any repetition of the bombing of Najin or any other place equally close to the Soviet or Manchurian frontiers.”¹²

In response, Johnson wrote to Acheson on August 21 and defended the attack on Rashin. The city was one of several “highly important military targets in North Korea, all of which must be rendered incapable... of providing logistic support to North Korean forces,” he explained, and the bombing had been directed by the JCS and met with the President’s approval. Moreover, Johnson insisted that seventeen miles *was* “well clear” of the Soviet frontier and, therefore, “within the terms of the Presidential directive.” He argued that the restriction was “intended only to guard against the possibility of frontier violation and not to provide for political determination as to which military objectives within the area of North Korea may or may not be bombed.” The Secretary further denied that the bombing was directed against Soviet strategic capabilities and reasoned that if the Soviets thought U.S. operations were a pretext for attacking them, “our entire Korean campaign”

¹² James E. Webb to Louis Johnson, August 16, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

could be seen as a threat. Nevertheless, Johnson shared State's concern about the internal implications of Korea but remained convinced that "there must be no weakening exception to our military effort within Korean territory" if the administration wanted military leaders to carry out their responsibilities and "to avoid unnecessary casualties." In other words, Johnson believed in the importance of political and diplomatic considerations but insisted that military necessity trumped both. "In short," he concluded, "once war operations are undertaken, it seems to me that they must be conducted to win." If "external appearances [were] permitted to conflict with or hamper military judgment in actual combat decision," the effectiveness of the war effort would be "jeopardized."¹³ For Johnson, the United States needed to do whatever it took to win the war and concerns about a non-existent war should not be allowed to interfere with the existing one.

The State Department took the opposite view, however, believing that avoiding a potential world war or nuclear war should take precedence over winning the current limited war, and Acheson took the issue to Truman on September 11 in a final appeal to prioritize diplomatic over military considerations. U.S. policy, Acheson stated, was to localize the Korean conflict and avoid "any unnecessary extension of hostilities or the outbreak of a general war." The State Department did not intend to inhibit the progress of military operations, but it was also their responsibility "to assess the political risks and possible consequences of proposed military actions as they might affect this policy" and bombing Rashin carried "serious risks." Contrary to Johnson, Acheson argued that the directive to stay "well clear" of the Chinese and Soviet frontiers was "more than an injunction simply to avoid a violation of these frontiers, or it would have been so stated." Seventeen miles was too close given the Kremlin's pathological sensitivity and Acheson asserted that "Military operations of any character in that vicinity cannot but give them deepest concern and keep them in a state of

¹³ Louis Johnson to Dean Acheson, August 21, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

constant alert.” If the U.S. violated the frontier or, if the Soviets *believed* the U.S. had violated the frontier, local Soviet commanders might try to intercept American planes and that “could well produce an incident with incalculable consequences.” Once again, Acheson used Kennan’s words to warn that U.S. operations might provoke Soviet “protective measures” against further violations “and thus lead to a reoccupation of North Korea by Soviet armed forces” or even attacks against the U.S. in Japan. “In short,” the Secretary concluded, “the bombing of Rashin or of any other place of equal proximity to the Soviet or Manchurian frontier runs the pressing danger of causing the Soviet Union to react in the very way we wish to avoid.” From here on out, “the specific military advantages” of attacking Rashin (or other targets close to the border) should be “weighed against the risk of the grave political and military consequences.”¹⁴

Although the matter of bombing Rashin subsided, the disputes between the State and Defense Departments were never fully settled and Truman seems to have inadvertently played the two against each other by telling each side what they wanted to hear. More importantly, the issue of waging war in Korea without provoking China and the Soviet Union only became more stressful and severe. Later in August 1950, many Americans argued that the U.S. should stop walking on eggshells and accept or even begin a war with the USSR. War with the Soviets was inevitable or already underway, many felt, and, rather than waiting for the enemy to start a war that the U.S. might lose, the United States should launch a preventive war that it could win.

PREVENTIVE WAR

The Korean War quickly stuck Truman and his advisors on the horns of a strategic and moral dilemma. On the one hand, they were committed to the Truman Doctrine and determined to

¹⁴ Dean Acheson to Harry S. Truman, September 11, 1950; Issue of Bombing North Korean Cities, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

contain communist aggression in Korea. On the other hand, they did not want to embroil the United States in a third world war. In the first sixty days of the conflict, however, containing communism and containing the war began to seem incompatible. As U.S. and UN forces repelled repeated attacks by the Korean People's Army (KPA) around the Pusan Perimeter in August 1950, some U.S. officials argued for more aggressive action against North Korea, the Soviet Union, and international communism. Instead of fighting to contain communism, these hawkish officials wanted to roll-back and defeat communism, and they were willing to expand and escalate the war to do so. Indeed, several prominent leaders called publicly for preventive war, or the threat of it, against the USSR. By starting a war with the Soviets, or dropping atomic bombs on Moscow, they hoped to prevent the Soviet Union and communism, once and for all, from taking over the world.

The most notable public spokesman for preventive war was Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews who called on Americans to become "aggressors for peace" and save the world by attacking the USSR. Harold Stassen, the former governor of Minnesota and Republican candidate for president in 1948, proposed to replace the laborious Truman Doctrine with a new doctrine by which the United States would respond to any communist attack on a foreign nation with war on Moscow. General Orvil A. Anderson, the Commandant of the Air War College, and George N. Craig, the National Commander of the American Legion, advocated preventive nuclear attacks as well. Even Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson mused privately about preventive war.

To date, the Truman administration had tried to limit the war and keep the conflict in Korea from expanding or escalating into a war with Russia which would turn into another world war. But some officials inside the government, and many Americans outside it, believed that communism was trying to take over the world and that war with the USSR was inevitable or that the United States was already at war with the Soviet Union. They contended that Korea was merely the opening salvo of World War III and that the best way to win or preclude another world war was to initiate a

preventive war and “strike at the heart of Communist strength – at Russia herself – with A-bombs.” Preventive war thus embodied the American way of war as proponents assumed that the U.S. could knock-out communism at a single stroke.¹⁵

Opponents of preventive war argued, in contrast, that war with the Soviet Union was not inevitable and that the United States should seek peace, not war. They argued that the United States had an obligation as an enlightened nation, not to use violence except to defend itself from attack and that a preventive war would effectively start the very thing that the U.S. wanted to avoid. Moreover, critics contended that an atomic attack on the USSR would not be decisive, quick, or easy, or even successful. They insisted that a preventive war would be “as long and bitter as any war and would wreck civilization” for both the United States and the Soviet Union. Critics further alleged that preventive war was immoral and un-American. Regardless of the reasons the U.S. might give for launching the attack, the world would see the United States as aggressors for resorting to force and violence. The *New York Times* explained, “For our own consciences, preventive war would mean that we had adopted war as an affirmative instrument of foreign policy.”¹⁶

The controversy over preventive war showed how divided the United States was on Cold War policy in 1950. During World War II, the Roosevelt and Truman administrations had enjoyed a super majority of support, largely because of Pearl Harbor and military necessity. The Korean War was much more controversial, however, and the calls for preventive war divided Americans into hawks and doves. Driven by their experiences and memories of World War II and fervent anti-communism, Korean hawks still believed that victory was worth any cost and veterans, conservatives, and anti-communists supported aggression, roll-back, nuclear attacks, and all-out war

¹⁵ “Against ‘Preventive War,’ *NYT*, September 3, 1950.

¹⁶ “Against ‘Preventive War,’ *NYT*, September 3, 1950; James Marlow, “The Preventive War Argument,” *Associated Press*, September 6, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

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to defeat the Soviet Union and achieve total victory over communism. Korean doves, on the other hand, did not believe that victory was worth *any* price, and they promoted greater restraint to avoid the costs of World War III and nuclear war. For intellectuals, clergymen, and most of the nation's leading journalists, as well as the White House, total victory and unconditional surrender had become impossible and immoral because they believed that the costs of a nuclear war or another world war would be intolerable. They therefore substituted containment in place of roll-back, limited war for preventive or total war, and stability instead of victory.

Francis P. Matthews

Most famously, on August 25, 1950, Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews spoke at the 150th anniversary of the naval shipyard in Boston and advocated for preventive war. Matthews was “a soft-spoken, old-line politician” and businessman from Omaha who kept the quartet of service secretaries “in touch with grass-roots politics.” Although he was reportedly resented by the Navy at first, Matthews had grown into “the most underestimated man in Washington.”¹⁷

During the American Revolution, Matthews began, American patriots fought for freedom “by starting a war with the mother country” and became “aggressors for freedom.” Although patriots were the aggressors in the war, Matthews praised them for violating “the peace of their time in a most holy cause” and for paying the price of freedom: “They realized the cost they would have to pay to attain their cherished goal. They measured the price that would be exacted in blood and tears and treasure to achieve the priceless possession and the unfettered enjoyment of the sacred privileges of liberty and freedom.” As the descendants, beneficiaries, and “trustees of this sacred inheritance,” Americans had become “the custodians of the Holy Grail from which emanates the inspiration of the Magna Carta and the Declaration of Independence,” Matthews declared. “We are

¹⁷ “Armed Services Working Together,” *Business Week* (September 9, 1950), 25; 1950, August, Boston Speech – “Preventive War” Controversy, Box 52, FPMP, HSTPL.

the repository of the Ark of the Covenant, in which are enshrined the imperishable hopes of man to live in peace and freedom.” In effect, then, Matthews claimed that the United States was fighting the American Revolution all over again in Korea and he asked whether Americans were willing to pay the same price as their ancestors to preserve liberty and freedom “for the whole of mankind and its posterity.”¹⁸

To have world peace, Matthews called for preventive war and called on Americans to become “aggressors for peace.” He acknowledged that democracies did not typically seek international harmony through violence – “Never have we drawn the sword unless first attacked and so compelled to fight in self-defense” – but Matthews thought the U.S. might have to change its policy since national survival could be “purchased only by those who are capable of resisting successfully a violation of their rights.” The U.S. should first prepare to resist any attack, he expounded, but then it should also proclaim boldly its objective to achieve world peace – at any price. As Matthews declared, “To have peace we should be willing, and declare our intention to pay any price, even the price of instituting a war to compel cooperation for peace.” The secretary knew that other nations would call Americans imperialists, but Matthews was willing to “accept that slander.” Even if the United States had to adopt a new democratic character and initiate “a war of aggression,” he did not think it was a role Americans should or could deny.¹⁹

Harold Stassen

Matthews was the most prominent proponent of preventive war and his speech made the most headlines, but he was not the only one who argued that the U.S. should attack the Soviet Union first. Ten days before Matthews’ speech in Boston, the president of the University of

¹⁸ Francis P. Matthews, “Aggressors for Peace,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 16, no. 23 (September 15, 1950): 730-731.

¹⁹ Francis P. Matthews, 731-732.

Pennsylvania, Harold E. Stassen, delivered a speech on August 15 over the Columbia Broadcasting System calling for the Truman administration to take a stronger stance against communism. A former Republican governor of Minnesota and delegate to the UN founding convention in San Francisco, Stassen had also run for president in 1948 and served as the president of the International Council of Religious Education. In his speech, he highlighted the threat of the Soviet Union and international communism. The Soviet Union was an “unfriendly power” possessing an “ideology that might makes right, that man is meant to be dominated by other men, and that there is no God,” he affirmed. The USSR was also armed with more military might than Germany ever had under Hitler or the Kaiser and had established dictatorships over one-third of the world and orchestrated Fifth Columns in every major power. These threats, Stassen warned, meant that the United States was in more danger “than at any time in the last fifty years.”²⁰

But faced with the greatest existential threat of the twentieth century, the Truman administration had confusedly sown “pink seeds” that would “reap a red whirlwind,” Stassen complained. The United States had to face facts, he declared, and recognize that the Kremlin was fixed on a program of world domination involving the conquest of other nations, embroiling free nations in minor wars, threats of aggression, and “a direct surprise attack upon the United States.” The U.S. had to be able to meet any one of those four challenges, but Stassen worried that if the U.S. tried to put out every communist fire in Korea, Greece, or Indochina, its strength would be “dissipated,” American soldiers would be overwhelmed and killed by communist satellites, and the U.S. giant would be “pinned to the earth” like Lemuel Gulliver by its own Lilliputian “errors of policy.”²¹

²⁰ Harold E. Stassen, “Reaping the Red Whirlwind,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 16, no. 22 (September 1, 1950): 674; William S. White, “Stassen Demands Warning To Russia,” *NYT*, August 16, 1950.

²¹ Harold E. Stassen, 675.

Stassen agreed that the U.S. could not allow Korea and other nations to be divided and cut off one by one by communism's salami tactics but, rather than trying to contain the outbreaks of communist aggression, he argued that the U.S. should attack the cause of the cancer and hold the Kremlin responsible for communist aggression, wherever it took place. Stassen's Doctrine held that any communist attack in any foreign nation would mean war with Moscow. Stassen did not argue for preventive war, but he wanted the U.S. to make it clear "that if the Communist leaders do in fact start World War III by aggression through their satellites and puppets, we and our associates in the United Nations intend to finish it, in due time, against the Kremlin itself." The United States had been caught off guard by North Korea's invasion and Stassen wanted to ensure that the free world was not bled white by continual communist provocations. Put another way, Stassen explained:

Uncle Sam is a world champion fighter when he is aroused, when he understands the necessity of the fight, and when he is prepared. We must not permit Uncle Sam to be chopped down finger by finger, arm by arm, by preliminary fights for which he is not prepared. If the persistent ruthless actions of others makes a world fight unavoidable, a ready, alert, wise Uncle Sam must move directly to the main fight!

In short, Stassen averred that "America must be prepared to bring war directly to the centers of Communist power if they persist in starting World War III through satellite aggression." He did not believe that another world war was inevitable since non-communists surely did not want war, and he hoped that the U.S. could win "a just world peace without incurring the horror of World War III." But if the Soviet Union was willing to start another world war, the United States needed to be prepared and willing to win it.²²

Air Force & American Legion

As the country reacted to Matthews' speech, reports emerged that some Air Force officials advocated preventive war as well. The Commandant of the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama, Maj. General Orvil A. Anderson, had espoused preventive war in his lectures, briefings,

²² Harold E. Stassen, 675-677.

and interviews. At the end of August, Anderson was quoted as saying: “Give me the order to do it and I can break up Russia’s five A-bomb nests in a week... And when I went up to Christ – I think I could explain to Him that I had saved civilization.”²³ Preventive war, in Anderson’s case, was not just a duty or a military necessity but a sacrament.

At the same time, the National Commander of the American Legion, George N. Craig, made a case for preventive war too. In an NBC radio broadcast on August 27, Craig declared that the United States could not afford “any more satellite wars” and he urged the U.S. to take the fight directly to the Soviet Union. “If Russian puppets start trouble anywhere,” he explained, “that will be the signal for our bombers to wing their way toward Moscow.” He implied that it would be better to start a war, if it meant the U.S. would win, than it would be to wait and fight a war that the U.S. might lose. “If Russia is going to bring on World War III, let us have it upon our terms,” he stated. Just two weeks earlier on NBC’s *Meet the Press*, Craig had specified that preventive war was a military decision and that the United States was not fully prepared to have a showdown with Russia. But now, like Secretary Matthews, Craig argued that “America must now take a resolute stand for world peace by compulsion,” with nuclear weapons if necessary. “We have this prevention power,” he announced, “We have the atomic bomb, and we have the industrial might. We can and must put our manpower behind both.” Overall, therefore, Craig wanted the United States to go on the offensive against communism and the USSR and, in addition to a potential preventive war, he proposed a series of policies to stop the “Communist steam-roller in its tracks.” He proposed that the U.S. extend the Monroe Doctrine to all areas of the free world who wanted protection, introduce economic sanctions against Russia, withdraw recognition of the Soviet Union, abrogate the Yalta agreement and every other treaty or accord with the USSR, and demand that countries receiving aid

²³ “Against ‘Preventive War,’ *NYT*, September 3, 1950.

through the Marshall Plan quit trading across the Iron Curtain. At home, Craig called for universal military training and legislation to end communism in America. After all, he reasoned, “the Communists now conspiring and plotting in the United States are the same brand now killing American boys in Korea.”²⁴

Reactions

The statements about preventive war, especially Matthews’, ignited a fierce political controversy about policymaking in the Truman administration but it also sparked a larger moral debate over how far the United States should go to defend Korea and defeat communism in the Cold War. The controversy highlighted the divide between military doves and hawks or, as the *Washington Post* described, the cleavage between followers of James Burnham who supported rollback and those of George Kennan who favored containment.²⁵ As strategists, reporters, and ordinary Americans debated U.S. objectives in Korea and the Cold War more broadly, they also illuminated the moral schism between disciples who continued to trust that victory was worth any price, and dissenters who believed that total victory was intolerably costly.

Within the Truman administration, the speech “provoked the gravest and most public Cabinet policy split” since Truman fired Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace in 1946. The State Department formally disavowed Matthews’ speech and “spanked” the Secretary publicly.²⁶ Under the direction of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Roger W. Tubby, the department’s press officer, clarified that Matthews’ speech had not been cleared and his views did not reflect U.S. policy – “The

²⁴ “Legion Head Urges ‘Stop-Russia’ Move,” *NYT*, August 27, 1950; “Bomb Moscow Craig Asks If Reds Hit Again,” *WP*, August 27, 1950; *Meet the Press*, August 13, 1950.

²⁵ “Matthews Vs. Acheson,” *WP*, August 28, 1950; 1950, August, Boston Speech – “Preventive War” Controversy, Box 52, FPMP, HSTPL.

²⁶ The American Magazine Washington News Letter, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

United States does not favor instituting a war of any kind,” he stated.²⁷ In the U.S. Air Force, General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the Chief of the Air Force, suspended General Anderson as commandant of the Air War College on September 2, one day after the President came out publicly against preventive war. Vandenberg clarified that the Air Force’s purpose was the “prevention of war,” and he wanted Americans to know that “the Air Force first, last and always is primarily an instrument for peace.” General Anderson retired shortly thereafter.²⁸

The popular reaction to preventive war was more mixed, however. Per usual, Matthews received dozens of letters and notes congratulating or condemning him with slightly more than sixty percent of the messages endorsing his speech. Generally, veterans, reservists, and some urbane communities supported Matthews’ speech out of “patriotic materialism” while women, intellectuals, and clergymen largely opposed the speech for “humanitarian reasons.”²⁹

For/Pro

Scores of Americans commended Matthews and his speech in Boston. Many praised the secretary for his common sense, realistic thinking, and courage, and they believed, naturally, that the majority of Americans agreed with him (and them). In Congress, Senator Richard Russell (D-GA) called Matthews’ speech “a perfectly grand thing” and, although he himself did not call for preventive war, Russell thought Americans should think about it.³⁰ Senator Karl E. Mundt (R-SD) contended that the administration was wrong to repudiate Matthews’ speech. He hoped that the U.S.

²⁷ Walter H. Waggoner, “U.S. Disowns Matthews Talk Of Waging War to Get Peace,” *NYT*, August 27, 1950. “Sec. Matthews Rebuked for War Speech,” *WP*, August 27, 1950; 1950, August, Boston Speech – “Preventive War” Controversy, Box 52, FPMP, HSTPL.

²⁸ Austin Stevens, “General Removed Over War Speech,” *NYT*, September 2, 1950; Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 82-83.

²⁹ George E. Pelletier to Francis P. Matthews, undated; Boston Speech, Analysis of Public Opinion Mail On, Box 39, FPMP, HSTPL

³⁰ “Sen. Russell Urges: Do Not Close Door on Preventive War,” undated; 1950, August, Boston Speech – “Preventive War” Controversy, Box 52, FPMP, HSTPL.

would not have to fight a preventive war but he criticized Truman and Acheson just the same for being soft on communism.³¹

Much of the country favored preventive war and backed Matthews because of the lessons they had learned from World War II. Due to their recent memories, victory remained the supreme objective of military strategy. In the last war, military necessity was more important than any ethical principle; in fact, defeating Germany and Japan *had been* the highest practical and moral consideration. Believing victory was worth any cost and imbued with a crusading anti-communism, these disciples of victory wanted to roll-back communism, not just contain it. In short, they planned to fight the Korean War the same way they had fought World War II – all-in, for total victory, whatever the cost. For example, in a letter to Matthews, John Soderman, an American Legionnaire in Napa, California, praised the secretary for exhibiting the “highest quality of Americanism.” The U.S. had appeased Russia for seventeen years, he asserted, and it was time to take aggressive action. Soderman wanted the government to issue an ultimatum to the USSR, warning it “to desist from spreading her infamous doctrine, or else we will take appropriate action to force her to do so.” In fact, he had urged members of Congress to invite all nations “to join us in action to attack Russia from every direction... And to use A. & H bombs if necessary, to defeat Russia in the shortest possible time.” He reckoned that “Eventually, we will have to use the bombs, or submit to Russia.” In essence, Soderman proposed to initiate, fight, and win World War III in the same way that the U.S. had fought and won World War II. He planned to issue a declaration or ultimatum like the Casablanca doctrine or the Potsdam Proclamation, he proposed a grand alliance to attack the enemy from every side, and he intended to bomb the USSR into submission, using nuclear weapons if necessary. Once the Soviet Union was defeated, it could be democratized just like Germany and

³¹ Telegram, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

Japan and the U.S. could establish a new United Nations organization led by, and modeled on, the United States.³² If Soderman's ambitions seemed extreme, it was because American values, attitudes, and ethics had changed since World War II – due largely to the advent of nuclear war.

The Second World War was also a black and white war for many Americans, and they believed that there were only two ways to respond to threats: aggression or appeasement. Because Munich and the war had destroyed the political and moral merits of appeasement and negotiation, hawkish anti-communists favored aggression against the USSR. In other words, the evils and risks of appeasement made Americans more willing to pay the price of aggression. Writing for the *Washington Evening Star*, David Lawrence admitted that Matthews had spoken out of turn but maintained that his speech in Boston had raised an important issue of how to combat communism. The State Department could not simply gaze into the crystal ball and guess what the communists might do; did the U.S. still have to wait for the enemy to declare war? “Would the American people be willing to see New York or Detroit or any other American cities suddenly destroyed without warning by atom bombs by an aggressor state and then only begin to retaliate by dropping our own atom bombs over the aggressor country?” Lawrence questioned. No administration would ever start a war, he insisted, but when threatened, Americans wondered whether they should pursue appeasement or resistance (as if those were the only options). How long, he asked, should the United Nations or the United States wait, and how many times must they be attacked, before they could justifiably attack the threat at the source? In Korea, for instance, Lawrence felt frustrated that Russian and Chinese aid was helping to kill American boys. Now that Moscow had started a shooting war, he felt the U.S. and the UN could no longer treat the Soviets as equals “when his

³² John Soderman to Francis P. Matthews, August 30, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL. Soderman's “FEDERAL UNION OF MANY STATES” would be made up of republican governments from around the world and England would be forced to renounce its royal houses.

hands are covered with the blood of Allied soldiers.” By refusing to hold the USSR or the PRC responsible for the deaths of U.S. soldiers, Truman and Acheson were appeasing the communists, he claimed.³³ Others felt similarly betrayed by American inaction. Dudley Swim from Pebble Beach, California, wanted the U.S. to seize the initiative and attack the Soviets because he figured “it would be better to fight a preventive war than face ultimate defeat.” Inaction was the same as appeasement, in his mind, and a continuation of the government’s treacherous policy of selling-out World War II veterans.³⁴

Supporters of preventive war also remained committed to the American way of war. Remembering how the atomic bombs had devastated Japan and forced Tokyo to surrender unconditionally, they believed that nuclear weapons and decisive blows could enable the United States to achieve total victory at minimal cost once again. They thought they could defeat communism via war and preferred to overcome communism and the Soviet Union definitively and quickly in another world war rather than to weather the repeated and often inconclusive crises of the Cold War. The *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, thought it was “proper” for Americans to feel shocked at the thought of deliberately starting a war and believed the administration had been wise to disavow Matthews’ speech. However, the *Journal* observed that preventive war was an irrational idea and “the feeling that any price is worth paying to get things settled is a logical, if horrible, development of a foreign policy that keeps a nation perpetually on the verge of war.” Like it or not, the editorial warned, the Cold War could become so intolerable that “even war is welcomed by many people as a relief from tension.” Obviously, “We all abhor war,” the *Journal* declared, but you did not

³³ Department of State, Daily Opinion Summary No. 1443, August 28, 1950; David Lawrence, “Matthews Speech Is Realistic if Not In Line With Policy,” *The Washington Star*, August 28, 1950; David Lawrence, “Truman and Congress Seen Not All Clear on ‘Preventive War,’” *Washington Evening Star*, September 5, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

³⁴ Dudley Swim to Francis P. Matthews, August 29, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

have to look far to understand how Americans could develop the conviction that war was a small price to pay for peace: “Now as men die first on this battlefield and then on that, as the burden of half-peace becomes more and more crushing, and as the inevitability of a big war becomes more and more accepted – will it then be surprising if more people, in both high and low places, come to tolerate the idea of war as a relief from the intolerable frustration of fear?”³⁵ Many Americans seemed, in fact, to have reached the limits of their tolerance already and concluded that World War III was preferable to a Cold War. Edwin Calvin in Everett, Ohio, argued that the U.S. could not afford to fight proxy cold wars. “We cannot fight a dozen wars like the Korean War where no Russian soldiers lose their lives,” he told wrote. “We must Atom Bomb the Kremlin before we are bled to death.”³⁶ Mrs. J. J. Eagan from Longview, Washington, likewise told Matthews that fighting satellite wars was “Like trying to subdue an octopus by whacking away at one tenacle [sic] after another in bloody, costly wars.”³⁷ Containment, she suggested, was an exhausting treadmill policy and she supported more decisive action – “off with [Stalin’s] head!!” she proclaimed.

Some Americans justified preventive war by claiming that the attacks were not preventive at all because the world was already at war. Almost everyone seemed to agree that communists were trying to conquer the world. In a letter to Matthews, Lt. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer asserted that the U.S. had been engaged in a “phony war” for several years now against communist aggressors and, in a speech to the National War College on August 30, he argued that “we are on the brink of, if not already involved in World War III.”³⁸ James Marlow wrote for the Associated Press that, “Bit by bit Communism is gobbling up the world: by treachery, pressure, threats, and even force, when

³⁵ “Review and Outlook: Preventive War,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

³⁶ Edwin Calvin to Francis P. Matthews, September 14, 1950; Boston Speech Comments, Box 57, FPMP, HSTPL.

³⁷ Mrs. J. J. Eagan to Francis P. Matthews, August 29, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

³⁸ A. C. Wedemeyer to Francis P. Matthews, September 12, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

necessary, as in Korea.” If left unchallenged, communism would continue to take over. Critics who shuddered at the prospect of preventive war were “still thinking in the old, hackneyed, out-of-date idea of war,” Marlow claimed. “They think that war is something waged, as it was in the old days, only with men and guns.” Therefore, since communists were making war on Americans every day through infiltration, propaganda, subversion, and force, any attack on Russia would be justified in self-defense.³⁹

In justifying preventive war, however, Marlow made two errors. First, by ascribing all communist threats to the same master plan for Soviet world domination, Marlow combined two different types of dangers and confused the purpose of preventive war. If the United States was not already at war with the Soviet Union, then preventive war would simply be an attempt to start a world war that the United States could win, instead of waiting for the Soviets to start a world war that the United States might lose. But if the U.S. was not currently at war, then preventive war had nothing to do with communist subversion or infiltration because it would be *preventive*. If the U.S. *was* already at war, then any action on any front would not be preventive at all, but retaliative. Second, Marlow suggested that all means in warfare were equal and ignored the principle of proportionality. Fighting communist propaganda with American propaganda or infiltration with counter-espionage seemed logical. But deploying old-fashioned men and guns (and new revolutionary bombs) to combat subversion was overkill and using them against Moscow when the fighting was currently limited to the Korean peninsula would have been a dramatic escalation of the war.

The letters to Secretary Matthews also showed that many Americans favored a preventive war because they felt bullish about the atomic bomb and prejudiced against Russians or Chinese.

³⁹ James Marlow, “The Preventive War Argument,” *Associated Press*, September 6, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

Instead of a nuclear taboo, their technological and racial fanaticism created a lethal nuclear sanction that dismissed any moral qualms about using nuclear weapons. One American nationalist, for example, commended preventive war as the only practical idea to make the world safe for democracy but claimed Matthews' speech came too late. If the U.S. had "bombed Hell out of Russia three years ago, the Soviets would have been unable to menace a free world," the author asserted, "a few atom bombs dropped upon Moscow and other principal cities of the Communist headquarters, would have had a most calming effect." Unfortunately, the writer continued, the current administration seemed committed to "submitting to a knock-out blow before taking any steps to protect ourselves and, now that the Soviets had the bomb, preventive war likely would not work. The nationalist contended that, in a war with Russia, "we would probably win in the end, but at a terrific cost in lives and property; the elimination, the extermination of the Russian vermin should have been undertaken a few years ago."⁴⁰ Another letter-writer told Matthews (as if the secretary had any authority to do so), "If those Chinese hordes move against our boys please use the A-bombs!"⁴¹

These letters reflected the confidence that Americans felt in their atomic ace. They regarded atomic bombs as silver bullets, war-winning weapons of victory, and could not understand why officials seemed hesitant to employ them. At the same time, however, the letters revealed that many Americans were clueless about the effects of nuclear weapons and obviously illiterate about the logistics of deploying them, as well as ignorant about how many bombs the U.S. actually possessed.⁴² Nuclear hawks supported preventive or unlimited war, therefore, because they thought the United States did not have any limits. Edwin Hopkins in New York even sent Matthews the lyrics to a

⁴⁰ Anonymous to Francis P. Matthews, undated; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁴¹ Anonymous to Francis P. Matthews, August 27, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁴² The *Washington Post* referred to this as "easy-victory-through-atom-bombing hokum." See "Finletter and Matthews," *WP*, August 30, 1950; 1950, August, Boston Speech – "Preventive War" Controversy, Box 52, FPMP, HSTPL.

marching song he had written entitled “What Are We Waiting For.” The first verse and refrain exclaimed:⁴³

Oh, we’ve got the bomb, the atom bomb,
 That makes a great big noise;
And though it’s small, when it goes off,
 The whole wide world is jarred!
And where it lands there’s nothing left,
 But what it clean destroys;
The hand of God, an angry God,
 Could not slap down so hard!

Well, now, what are we waiting for?
We’ve got what it takes to lick the Reds;
We’ve got the guns, we’ve got the planes,
We’ve got the bombs he dreads!
 Why fiddle around, isolationist bound,
 Putting up with low insults hurled?
 Stop the Aggressor in his tracks,
 Or he’ll enslave the world!

“What are we waiting for?” became a common refrain among arguments for preventive war. Many Americans favored preemptive attacks, not because they ran out of patience, but because they thought patience was suicidal. The United States had a long history of waiting for the other guy to draw first but, now that Russia had the bomb too, many Americans argued that the U.S. could no longer afford to wait. As Senator Richard Russell explained, “the idea that we can’t shoot until we’re shot at” might have worked before the Atomic Age, but not any longer.⁴⁴ General Wedemeyer warned the National War College that once the Soviets had a sizeable nuclear stockpile they could carry out “a hundred Pearl Harbors throughout the United States.”⁴⁵ Given the indescribable power of nuclear weapons, the side that fired first might be able to destroy the other outright. With an

⁴³ Edwin Hopkins to Francis P. Matthews, August 29, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁴⁴ “Sen. Russell Urges: Do Not Close Door on Preventive War,” undated; 1950, August, Boston Speech – “Preventive War” Controversy, Box 52, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁴⁵ A. C. Wedemeyer to Francis P. Matthews, September 12, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

overwhelming first-strike capability, there might not *be* a second strike and the U.S. would have no chance to retaliate. Therefore, since the nuclear revolution had changed the game, some Americans argued that the rules of engagement should too, and that the U.S. should forfeit its traditional chivalry in favor of national survival. Believing that whichever side used atomic bombs first would prevail over the other, Joe Lloyd Norris, a naval veteran from Richmond, California, told Matthews that the U.S. had to attack Russia in order to survive.⁴⁶ Without preventive war, the U.S. was doomed, D. C. Abbott wrote from Sarasota, Florida. The United States had to use the atomic bomb, he reasoned, because “we never can win with man power.”⁴⁷ National annihilation thus seemed an intolerable price to pay for moral principle and some Americans were gratified by preventive nuclear war.

In sum, Americans who ignored all dangers of preventive war did so because they remained committed to victory at any cost. Joe Lloyd Norris, knew from his Navy days in World War II how terrible war was, but he told Matthews that he did not want his wife and son “to live under Russian domination.”⁴⁸ Paul Laird Sr. from Annandale, Virginia, had similarly lost his first-born son in World War II but felt that if World War III was necessary to save the United States and keep the peace, he was willing to take the risk. Abroad, he encouraged the U.S. to go after the root of evil, as Matthew had suggested, and at home, he said that “All communists should be placed on road gangs now and be treated just as we did Jap-Americans.”⁴⁹ To those who demanded victory and dismissed its costs, anyone who balked at preventive war seemed guilty of pursuing peace at any price. Earl Christensen, a former GI from Arlington, Virginia, thought it was foolish to wait for the aggressor

⁴⁶ Joe Lloyd Norris to Francis P. Matthews, undated; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁴⁷ D. C. Abbott to Francis P. Matthews, September 12, 1950; Boston Speech Comments, Box 57, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁴⁸ Joe Lloyd Norris to Francis P. Matthews, undated; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁴⁹ Paul Laird Sr. to Francis P. Matthews, August 27, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

to strike first and claimed that “The longer we cling to our pitiful policy of peace at almost any price, the stronger Russia becomes,” he wrote to Matthews.⁵⁰ R. W. Tucker Jr. from Lebanon, New Jersey, exhorted the administration to abandon “the philosophy that anything is better than war, because most of us don’t believe that it is.”⁵¹

Against/Con

Although the majority of letter-writers supported Secretary Matthews, most editorials censured him. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* called the Boston speech “an outrageous and indefensible blunder” while the *Washington News* wrote “such talk is the sort of dynamite that could get us into a war for which we are not prepared.”⁵² Matthews’ critics were as prone to hyperbole as his supporters and, as always, many responded harshly and called for the secretary to resign positive that mainstream opinion sided with them.⁵³ One letter said Matthews was crazy to propose such a war.⁵⁴ Another from Santa Fe, New Mexico, called the speech “disgusting and disgraceful.”⁵⁵ A third from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, thought Matthews should get his head checked by a psychiatrist.⁵⁶ A large number of letters came from Anti-Catholics who saw Catholicism and communism as “totalitarian systems” trying to take over the world and they worried that Matthews, a “zealous Catholic” himself,

⁵⁰ Earl Christensen to Francis P. Matthews, August 27, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁵¹ R. W. Tucker Jr. to Francis P. Matthews, August 27, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail -- Pro, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁵² Department of State, Daily Opinion Summary No. 1443, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁵³ John and D. A. Davies to Francis P. Matthews, undated; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail -- Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁵⁴ LA McGillivray to Francis P. Matthews, August 25, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁵⁵ N. E. A. Hinds to Francis P. Matthews, August 29, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁵⁶ Bossler to Francis P. Matthews, August 31, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

had expressed the will of Rome.⁵⁷ Most detractors, however, did not detect anything conspiratorial in the Boston speech and they took Matthews to task for his own views. Russell Stokes from Mt. Holly, New Jersey, remarked that statements like Matthews' were "always made by people who have no intention of fighting in any war" and determined that "If war should come you could best serve the country by piloting a guided missile to its target personally."⁵⁸ Lyle Mercer sent Matthews a postcard from Seattle with a single sentence: "Resign – you maniac!"⁵⁹

More thoughtful commentators, however, denounced preventive war although many still called on Secretary Matthews to resign or be removed. *The Boston Herald* pointed out that Henry Wallace had been dropped as Secretary of Commerce when he had denounced the administration's hardball policies with Russia in an uncensored speech, and the paper resolved that "The President should go further and repudiate Mr. Matthews, too."⁶⁰ In the *Evening Star*, Lowell Mellett sympathized with impatient citizens but criticized Secretary Matthews and Commander Craig for proposing to precipitate another world war, the very thing the Truman administration was trying to avoid. He concluded that "any Government official guilty of giving way to his personal impatience, regardless of consequences, should be retired to private life."⁶¹

Matthews quickly clarified that he was speaking for himself and that "the speech speaks for itself."⁶² "It was exclusively my own idea," he stated, quashing suspicion that his remarks might have

⁵⁷ Grace G. Hudson to Harry S. Truman, August 27, 1950; see also Michael McTigue to Francis P. Matthews, August 26, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁵⁸ Russell Stokes to Francis P. Matthews, August 31, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁵⁹ Lyle Mercer to Francis P. Matthews, August 27, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail -- Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁶⁰ "Unification Wanted," *The Boston Herald*, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁶¹ Lowell Mellett, "On the Other Hand," *Evening Star*, August 29, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁶² "Sec. Matthews Rebuked for War Speech," *WP*, August 27, 1950; 1950, August, Boston Speech – "Preventive War" Controversy, Box 52, FPMP, HSTPL.

been a trial balloon from Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson.⁶³ But many critics took issue less with Matthews' words than with his policymaking and called for more unity in the Truman administration. There was nothing wrong with expressing his personal opinion, *The Boston Herald* wrote, but the Secretary of the Navy should not express views contrary to the policy of the administration.⁶⁴ Marquis Childs reminded readers in the *Washington Post* that a nation divided against itself could not stand and determined that "So long as this split exists, there can be no coherent and affirmative policy of any kind."⁶⁵ In Congress, John Kee (D-WV), who served as chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said that government officials who did not direct U.S. foreign policy should "keep their big mouths shut."⁶⁶

Many letter-writers worried that calls for preventive war played directly into Soviet hands and gave them grist for their propaganda mills. "Surely other men have been indicted for giving less 'comfort and help' to the enemy than you did by your speech," one minister wrote to Matthews.⁶⁷ Another affirmed, "The Russians have every right now to brand us as the instigators of a Third World War. You have given our opponents a terrible weapon of propaganda to use against us."⁶⁸

⁶³ "Sen. Russell Urges: Do Not Close Door on Preventive War," undated; 1950, August, Boston Speech – "Preventive War" Controversy, Box 52, FPMP, HSTPL. Apparently, Matthews rejected the draft of his speech that a Navy writer prepared for him and started writing his own speech at 3 AM at his home in Omaha. By 10 AM, he had completed his speech and mailed two copies to his office in the Pentagon. He assumed that his speech would be cleared through routine channels in the Defense and State Departments, as well as the White House. But instead of sending the speech to be cleared through Stephen T. Early, the Under Secretary of Defense, Matthew's office sent it to the Public Information Office of the Defense Department and that office also assumed the speech had been cleared and so they distributed it to the press. Matthews did not feel his speech contradicted U.S. policy though, and when the State Department disavowed it he considered resigning. President Truman, however, told Matthews to stay on the job. See "Matthews Assumed Speech Had Gone Through Channels," *Evening World-Herald*, August 29, 1950; 1950, August, Boston Speech – "Preventive War" Controversy, Box 52, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁶⁴ "Unification Wanted," *The Boston Herald*, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁶⁵ Marquis Childs, "Preventive War," *WP*, August 31, 1950; 1950, August, Boston Speech – "Preventive War" Controversy, Box 52, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁶⁶ Robert F. Whitney, "Jessup Abhors Idea Of Bombing Russia," *NYT*, August 28, 1950.

⁶⁷ John E. Bates to Francis P. Matthews, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁶⁸ Clarence F. Avey to Francis P. Matthews, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

Sure enough, communist papers in Bucharest, Warsaw, and other capitals in Eastern Europe denounced “the criminal plans of the American imperialists” and “the Wall Street cannibals.” One Polish commentary condemned Matthews’ cynical statement but observed that “The U.S. Government often has trouble with its oversincere and garrulous politicians in uniform and warriors in Mufti. They sometimes think too loudly.” Communist papers, therefore, took preventive war seriously and believed that Matthews had honestly voiced “the aims of the war-mongers.”⁶⁹ More gravely then, Americans feared that the calls for preventive war had now given the Soviets a pretext for attacking the United States. At CBS, Larry Lesueur worried that Matthews’ statement “may be taken so seriously by the Kremlin as to give them an excuse to attack us first,” and the *New York Post* stressed that as long as Matthews remained in office his words could be used by the Soviets “to justify future acts of ‘preventive’ aggression.”⁷⁰ After all, if Stalin thought that the U.S. was preparing for a preventive strike, what would stop him from launching his own preventive attack?⁷¹

Critics also believed that Matthews’ speech and other arguments for preventive war had not only helped Russia but undermined America’s global standing. The U.S. had won international respect and support because of its support for both freedom and peace. Preventive war would sacrifice America’s reputation and support, many letters contended.⁷² In Austin, Minnesota, Mrs. J. R. Chipault questioned how war could bring about peace and lamented that people around the world were looking to the U.S. for leadership but American leaders had “nothing better to offer than war – a war which can wipe out humanity.”⁷³ As many feared, American allies predictably panicked

⁶⁹ Summary of Communist News, August 29, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁷⁰ DOS, Daily Opinion Summary No. 1444, August 29, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁷¹ “A Preventive Suicide?” undated; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁷² “A Preventive Suicide?” undated; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁷³ Mrs. J. R. Chipault to Francis P. Matthews, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

over the calls for preventive war. French Defense Minister Jules Moch reiterated support for the UN in Korea and announced that France would *resist* aggression but would never take part in aggression as Secretary Matthews had suggested.⁷⁴

Overwhelmingly, however, most critics denounced preventive war because they wanted peace and felt that aggression was immoral and that doing evil, even in an attempt to do good, was wrong and unjustified. U.S. Ambassador at Large Philip C. Jessup, one of the administration officials who spoke out against Matthews' speech told Eric Sevareid in an interview that preventive war was un-American. "Dropping atomic bombs on the Soviet Union now is not the way we act; it is not the way America does things," he declared, reprimanding the secretary. War was never inevitable and, even if Americans' conscience allowed them to drop nuclear bombs on Moscow, Jessup argued that the U.S. would forfeit any international support or respect.⁷⁵

Many average Americans were similarly appalled by preventive war and they denounced the policy on moral grounds. Carrol B. Baston, a World War II veteran from Wood River, Illinois, pointed out that one could not be an aggressor and a peacemaker at the same time; nor could the U.S. make war and prevent war at the same time.⁷⁶ Dora L. Leichhardt from Kansas City told Matthews "I do not believe it any part of God's plan for us humans to devastate the homes and take the lives of millions of innocent people in the name of peace or for any other purpose."⁷⁷ M. O. and Annie Lee Williams from Leonia, New Jersey, hoped they had misunderstood Matthews' speech. To them it sounded like the secretary was proposing that the United States launch its own version of

⁷⁴ "France Bars Role in Preventive War," *NYT*, August 28, 1950.

⁷⁵ Robert F. Whitney, "Jessup Abhors Idea Of Bombing Russia," *NYT*, August 28, 1950.

⁷⁶ Caroll B. Baston to Francis P. Matthews, September 3, 1950; Boston Speech Comments, Box 57, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁷⁷ Dora L. Leichhardt to Francis P. Matthews, August 26, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

Pearl Harbor. “We can hardly believe that you would advocate our producing a day that ‘Will live in infamy,’” they exclaimed.⁷⁸

The clergy decried preventive war and Matthews’ speech most vehemently. In his Sunday morning sermon at the Community Church of New York, Rev. Donald Harrington denounced preventive war and compared Matthews’ policy to Hitler’s “who promised that his aggression would lead to peace for a thousand years.” The U.S. could only lead the world, Harrington claimed, if it lived up to its “better self.”⁷⁹ Rev. George W. Owen from Hyde Park, Massachusetts, announced that “a war of aggression in the interest of peace is un-Christian and brutal.” He understood Matthews’ “ultimate motive” but believed that “this plan would revive the fallacy of the Crusades and the horror of the Inquisition both of which tried to make a better world by force.” Instead of launching a preventive war, he encouraged the U.S. to “demonstrate a better way of life and win others to it.”⁸⁰ Minister John E. Bates at Middletown Baptist Church in New Jersey declared that Matthews’ policy was “not only the most unchristian but also the most undemocratic proposal I have heard during this great crisis.” By proposing preventive war, Matthews had “served only to undermine American morality in the eyes of the world and strengthen Soviet prestige,” and Bates felt that the plan to start a war raised severe doubts about the moral leadership of American democracy.⁸¹ Another clergyman, Clarence F. Avey of Starrett Memorial Methodist Church in Athol, Massachusetts, contended that preventive war was “wholly immoral, and against all the best traditions of American democracy.” What’s more, he wrote to Matthews, the United States would

⁷⁸ M. O. and Annie Lee Williams to Francis P. Matthews, August 27, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁷⁹ “Asks Matthews To Quit,” *NYT*, August 28, 1950.

⁸⁰ George W. Owen to Francis P. Matthews, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁸¹ John E. Bates to Francis P. Matthews, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

never win such a war.⁸² In Michigan, the Church of the Brethren argued that preventive war “runs counter to American tradition and the will of God as taught by Christ. The course advocated could only bring disgrace, destruction and the wrath of God and would, we believe, be just punishment upon us.”⁸³ Even though these clergymen opposed preventive war on religious and moral grounds, they did not promote pacifism or suggest that the U.S. should seek peace at any price. But, by 1950, it was clear that Americans had apostatized from the doctrine of victory at any cost.

Hanson W. Baldwin summarized many of the opposing perspectives in an editorial for the *New York Times* on September 1. He reported that arguments for preventive war had divided the country, confused American allies and friends, and created propaganda for the Soviet Union. Internally, the controversy had also turned the military into “policy makers rather than policy executors” and widened the divide between the State Department and the Pentagon. More importantly though, Baldwin denounced preventive war as “a most heinous and dangerous doctrine” and lamented that many Americans supported it. “It is basically a doctrine of desperation, frustration and negation,” he wrote. “It puts the cart before the horse; military policy takes primacy over foreign policy. It repeats the same grievous [sic] and fundamental error we made in World War II by making victory rather than the peace after victory the aim. It sacrifices the ultimate for the immediate and it extols the expedient at the price of morality.” Baldwin warned that if Chinese communists intervened in Korea and the United States launched a preventive war against the USSR, Western Europe and large parts of the world would likely be lost to the Soviets since an attack by the U.S. “could not be localized.” Furthermore, attacking Russia first would undermine the moral foundations of the United Nations and place the U.S. in a war with “confused and unwilling allies.”

⁸² Clarence F. Avey to Francis P. Matthews, August 28, 1950; Boston Speech, Public Opinion Mail – Con, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁸³ Jesse J. Cook and Arthur Whisler to Francis P. Matthews, September 1, 1950; Boston Speech Comments, Box 57, FPMP, HSTPL.

The United States might even have to fight alone, Baldwin stated. In his mind, preventive war was also unrealistic because it presumed that the U.S. could accurately deliver atomic bombs on Russian cities, deep in the Eurasian interior. Nevertheless, the policy seduced many Americans because it seemingly embodied the American way of war – decisive, quick, and cheap victories – but Baldwin insisted that preventive war would be intolerably costly:

The military case for a preventive war is founded upon the hopes of a quick and easy victory, that glittering and unrealistic goal that would be impossible if the Soviet Union dominated Western Europe and much of Asia. A preventive war would really mean a long, hard and vicious struggle, with no holds barred, in which we would lose, by our own action, moral and psychological backing and political support.

There were other political, economic, moral, and military reasons to oppose “this attractive [sic] fallacy” but, in sum, Baldwin declared that “preventive war is a course of political bankruptcy and moral frustration that would be militarily ineffective and which would lose for the United States the very values we are trying to defend. Such ideas, no matter whether advanced by the ‘loyal opposition’ or the party in power, should be scotched, and quickly.”⁸⁴

The *Wall Street Journal* concluded on a similar note and called on the country to renounce preventive war: “We pray that the American people will be spared the moral insanity of ever believing that war is preferable to peace or that war is a way to peace. Our real strength in the world today is moral, and should we do anything to lose that morality then we are lost indeed however big our bombs.” The editorial warned, however, that preventive war could become U.S. policy if conscientious Americans did not actively resist it. “Mr. Matthews does not now speak the sentiments

⁸⁴ Hanson W. Baldwin, “War of Prevention,” *NYT*, 1 September 1950; “Hanson Baldwin on Preventive War,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 6, no. 10 (October 1950): 318.

of the people,” the *Journal* wrote, “Yet if we do not give thought to what we are doing then someday, but for the grace of God, there go we all.”⁸⁵

Truman’s Speech

Although the press largely condemned it, preventive war received so much attention and popular support that President Truman decided that he had to tackle the controversy. On September 1, 1950, one week after Matthews’ speech in Boston, the President delivered a radio and television address on the war in Korea from the White House. “Tonight I want to talk to you about Korea, about why we are there, and what our objectives are,” he began. Truman framed the war much like he and Franklin Roosevelt had framed World War II and claimed that the United States was fighting for freedom and peace. He called the conflict in Korea an “age-old struggle for human liberty” and explained that American soldiers were defending “the cause of freedom in the world” and fighting to make peace “the law of this earth.” The President thus reaffirmed America’s commitment “to seek peace and security” through the United Nations and announced that “The United States has no other aim in Korea” than freedom and independence for Korea.⁸⁶

But while Truman indicated that the U.S. was fighting for the same principles as in World War II, he also announced that it would not fight *by* the same principles. Of course, the President pledged that the U.S. would support its soldiers “with every ounce of our strength and with all our hearts” and would “put aside all else for this supreme duty” because “No cause has ever been more just or more important.” Americans, he affirmed, were “prepared to do whatever is necessary in the cause of peace and freedom.” The rest of his speech suggested otherwise. According to Truman, when North Korea invaded South Korea, the free world faced two options: appeasement or

⁸⁵ “Review and Outlook: Preventive War,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 1950; Boston Speech, Editorial and News Comments, Box 40, FPMP, HSTPL.

⁸⁶ Harry S. Truman, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Situation in Korea,” September 1, 1950, APP.

resistance. World War II had demonstrated, however, that appeasement was merely “the sure road to world war” because if the free world permitted aggression in Korea, they would be inviting aggression elsewhere. The President therefore argued that the United States only had one choice. Given “the aggressive designs of the Communists,” he explained, the free world had to protect themselves and resist communism.⁸⁷

There was a third option, however, a third rail which Truman did not include because he rejected it outright. In a war for human security, peace, and freedom, the United States could have fought an all-out war, as it had in World War II. But the Truman administration, and much of the country, were not prepared or willing to do whatever was necessary to win. Indeed, the President clarified that, despite the expansive stakes, the United States would be fighting with more limited means for limited ends – a limited war. Accordingly, the United States wanted to keep the fighting contained to the Korean peninsula. Truman declared unreservedly, “We do not want the fighting in Korea to expand into a general war,” and he hoped that communist China would not be “misled or forced into fighting against the United Nations and against the American people.” The President clarified further that the U.S. did not seek any territory in Asia and explained that the U.S. 7th Fleet had been dispatched to the Straits of Formosa to keep it out of the conflict. “Our purpose is peace, not conquest,” Truman declared. Lastly, the President announced unequivocally, “We do not believe in aggressive or preventive war.” Truman explained, “war is the weapon of dictators, not of free democratic countries like the United States” and, ultimately, the U.S. wanted peace, not victory. American soldiers were fighting to end the war in Korea, not win it.

Truman’s restraint resonated with many Americans, but it marked a fundamental shift in American attitudes, values, and ethics about war. Despite his fustian rhetoric about the stakes of the

⁸⁷ Harry S. Truman, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Situation in Korea,” September 1, 1950, APP.

conflict and America's support for peace and freedom, Truman's speech revealed that American objectives had softened. The United States was not fighting for total victory, it did not demand the unconditional surrender of North Korean forces, and it certainly did not aim to defeat, demilitarize, and democratize its enemies in order to preclude future wars. The Korean War was not a war to end all wars in the same way that World War II had been. Instead, the U.S. and its allies aimed to contain communism and reestablish the status quo antebellum.

Consequently, while the United States had consistently expanded and escalated its efforts and fought a nearly unlimited war against Germany and Japan in order to win, the Truman administration determined to limit the war in Korea. More limited aims called for more limited policies. The United States thus aimed to contain not only communist aggression, but its own resistance and counter-aggression. The administration did not want to expand the war beyond the Korean peninsula, it did not want to provoke a war with the two communist poles – Moscow and Peking – and expand the conflict into a general or world war, and it did not want to escalate the war to involve nuclear weapons. In short, Truman and his advisors wanted to constrain the conflict, geographically, militarily, and morally.

Truman's constraints which limited American ends and means alluded to a broader revolution in American morality. Despite the President's assertions to the contrary, his administration and the American people at large were not willing to do whatever it took to win. They were no longer wholly dedicated to victory at any cost because president and layperson alike had begun to doubt whether victory was possible or moral. Taking into account the intolerable casualties of another world war and the earth-shaking power of nuclear weapons, many Americans began to consider whether peace was preferable to victory.

INCHON: RECAPTURING SOUTH KOREA

On July 26, General Walton H. Walker ordered his forces to withdraw to the Naktong River and stabilize the front, and three days later he issued a controversial “stand or die” order. During the next two weeks, however, UN forces were forced back further until they were cornered in an area 87 miles long and 56 miles wide around the port of Pusan. The Pusan Perimeter, as the press quickly labeled it, became the defensive line for Korean and UN forces who repelled repeated North Korean attacks and tried to prevent South Korea from being completely conquered. After several weeks of defensive operations, UN forces stabilized the perimeter and by September 1, as the preventive controversy raged at home, UN soldiers numbered 180,000, nearly twice the number of North Korean troops they faced. UN reinforcements and air superiority meant South Koreans were no longer at risk of being driven into the Korean Strait and the United Nations would not have to rescue their forces from being annihilated; Pusan would not become another Dunkirk.⁸⁸

With the situation under control in southern Korea, MacArthur counterattacked. On September 15, 1950, MacArthur landed an amphibious assault at Inchon, on Korea’s west coast not far from Seoul. Inchon had every possible natural handicap including two extremely high tides which is why North Korea never expected an invasion there.⁸⁹ And “despite their unanimous objections,” MacArthur sold the Joint Chiefs on the Inchon invasion by promising that it would “end the war by winter and save 100,000 [American] lives.”⁹⁰ Operation Chromite, as the invasion was named, succeeded brilliantly as U.S. forces surprised the North Koreans and completed a strategic reversal.

⁸⁸ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 158.

⁸⁹ James and Wells, 166.

⁹⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff to Douglas MacArthur, September 16, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, NAF, HSTPL.

At the same time that MacArthur's forces invaded Inchon and headed for Seoul, General Walker's armies broke out of the perimeter around Pusan and quickly advanced north to link up with the Inchon units. Within a week, UN forces reached Seoul and the city was recaptured by the end of the month despite the resistance of 20,000 KPA soldiers who decided to fight to the death. After taking the capital, MacArthur's troops worked their way toward the 38th Parallel while mopping up the remaining North Korean forces in the south and, by the end of September, the North Korean army of 150,000 had been virtually destroyed. At that point, as the National Security Council had noted in early September, the actions by the U.S., the UN, and the Kremlin would determine whether the war remained confined to Korea or expanded into World War III.⁹¹

⁹¹ National Security Council Report 81, "United States Courses of Action With Respect to Korea," September 1, 1950; The Korean War and Its Origins, PSF, HSTPL.

To the Yalu

CROSSING THE 38th PARALLEL

As North Korean forces retreated northward, U.S. and UN leaders faced a critical decision of whether to cross the 38th Parallel. The parallel had no real significance; the Allies had simply used it to facilitate the surrender of Japanese forces at the end of World War II. The Soviet Union received the surrender of Japanese soldiers north of the line while the United States oversaw the surrender south of the line. After the war, though, as in divided Germany, each side had established a government and society after its own image – communism in North Korea, anti-communism in South Korea. Koreans on both sides wanted to reunify the peninsula, however, and tensions between the two Koreas exploded into war after North Korean forces crossed the parallel and invaded South Korea in June. Now, UN forces had to decide whether to pursue KPA troops into North Korea or stop at the 38th Parallel.

Containment: The Case for Restraint

There were strong strategic, diplomatic, and moral reasons not to invade North Korea. Truman's own doctrine, the threat of an expanded or world war, and additional casualties all gave U.S. strategists good cause for pause. When the President had announced the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, the United States had pledged to support and defend any free nation that was threatened by communism. But the doctrine only committed the United States to contain communism; it did not promise to roll-back communism altogether. On September 1, when President Truman had clarified American aims and denounced preventive war, he announced that "The United States has no other aim in Korea" than freedom and independence for Korea. But did that refer only to South Korea, or to the entire peninsula? The government seemed divided on the

issue. The President, however, had also declared that the U.S. was fighting for peace, not conquest, and had rejected preventive, general, and unlimited war in favor of limited war.¹ In short, the United States had gone to war in Korea in order to contain communism and reestablish the status quo antebellum. UN forces had now recaptured Seoul and restored South Korea's territorial and political sovereignty. Mission accomplished.

Crossing the parallel also carried grave risks. Invading North Korea would commence an entirely new stage of the war requiring new objectives, military and diplomatic strategies, logistics, and postwar plans. The United States would have to rethink its entire role in Korea and East Asia. Fighting in North Korea would also cost more American lives. If the UN stopped now, no one else had to die. Furthermore, crossing the parallel would not only expand the war into North Korea, but risk expanding and escalating the conflict into a general or world war. Just as South Korea's allies had leaped to its defense when its territory was invaded, invading North Korea ran the risk that communist China and the Soviet Union might intervene to save their ally or satellite. An invasion of North Korea, therefore, could quickly escalate into a war between the UN and China and Russia. In other words, crossing the parallel could turn the Korean War into World War III.

More precisely though, UN forces did not need to invade North Korea to risk provoking a wider war because naval and air forces in North Korean territory were already running those risks. On September 4, for example, UN naval forces were operating off the Korean west coast near the 38th Parallel when they encountered a Soviet plane. The fleet sent up a pursuit squadron which shot down the aircraft. The next day, Warren Austin told the UN Security Council: "a twin-engined bomber, identified only by bearing a red star, passed over a screening ship and continued toward the center of the United Nations formation in a hostile manner. The bomber opened fire upon a United

¹ Harry S. Truman, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Situation in Korea," September 1, 1950, APP.

Nations fighter patrol, which returned its fire and shot it down.” A UN destroyer picked up the body of one of the plane’s crew members: Lieutenant Mishin Tennadii Vasilebiu of the armed forces of the Soviet Union.² In a press conference the following day, Dean Acheson told the same story but could not answer what the Soviet plane’s intentions were, why it was there, and why one plane attacked an entire UN fighter squadron. The important point though was that a Russian officer was killed but Acheson stated that the episode would be handled through the UN.³

According to Austin and the U.S. government, the incident proved how easily the war in Korea could escalate but, rather than pulling back, Austin urged the Security Council to adopt a resolution to localize the conflict and keep it from spreading. He also pressed the Soviet delegation to try to end the conflict from its end. As the U.S. had stated many times, “there is one Power which could bring an end to the fighting overnight if it were prepared to use its influence to that end.”⁴ For the Truman administration, the Soviets had started the war and they bore the heaviest responsibility to end it peacefully.

The Soviet Union predictably rejected the American version of events, though. The Kremlin claimed that the Soviet aircraft was unarmed with no hostile intentions because it was on a training mission between Port Arthur and Haiyan-Dao Island when it was attacked and shot down by eleven USAF fighters. The Soviets denied the American claims and insisted on a strict investigation and punishment of those responsible as well as compensation for the loss caused by the deaths of three flyers and destruction of their plane.⁵ Fortunately, the incident did not cause any further casualties or

² United Nations Press Release No. 942, September 5, 1950; State Department, Press Release No. 897, September 5, 1950; Military Incidents Involving the Soviet Union, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³ DOS, Memorandum of the Press and Radio News Conference, September 6, 1950; Military Incidents Involving the Soviet Union, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁴ United Nations Press Release No. 942, September 5, 1950; State Department, Press Release No. 897, September 5, 1950; Military Incidents Involving the Soviet Union, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁵ Alan Kirk to Dean Acheson, September 6, 1950; Note to UN Security Council, September 6, 1950; Military Incidents Involving the Soviet Union, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

provoke a wider war, but it did aggravate relations between the two superpowers, and it illustrated how easily the war could escalate and expand.

Roll-Back: The Case for Invasion

For many strategists in the Truman administration, however, the supposed benefits from liberating North Korea and unifying the Korean peninsula outweighed the apparent costs. Military necessity, the prospect of total victory, UN objectives, U.S. assessments, and South Korean lobbying all tempted or pressured the United States to invade North Korea. Military necessity began to push U.S. troops northward. MacArthur and the JCS did not think their mission had been accomplished. They believed that they needed to destroy North Korean forces above the 38th Parallel or else the small units would regroup and threaten South Korea again.

Crossing the parallel was also not a new idea, just a new opportunity. John Allison had told Dean Rusk on July 1 that the U.S. should continue to Manchuria and then call for the UN to supervise elections for all of Korea, and in the middle of July, MacArthur had met with General Collins and General Vandenberg in Tokyo and talked about entering North Korea to destroy its military forces and occupy some territory temporarily. U.S. strategists thus turned to liberating North Korea and unifying the peninsula as their military fortunes changed and unification became plausible.⁶ Hawkish anti-communists who had always been eager to strike a blow against communism called for UN forces to continue their advance northward and roll-back communist forces. Others who had always intended to stop at the 38th Parallel now began to push their luck. Only weeks before, UN armies had been surrounded around Pusan and the U.S. had deployed troops just in time to save South Korea from being completely overrun. But with KPA armies in full

⁶ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 180–81.

retreat and UN forces with momentum, U.S. strategists now saw an opportunity to get more than they bargained for and reunify the entire peninsula.

Meanwhile, UN Resolutions, which the U.S. supported, had called for an independent, united, and democratic Korea. At the United Nations, U.S. Ambassador Warren R. Austin emphasized the UN's commitment in speeches on August 10 and 17 and Acheson promoted the same in September. Abroad, British MPs called for the liberation of North Korea as well.⁷

The National Security Council also assessed the situation and recommended that U.S. forces advance beyond the 38th Parallel to fulfill the UN objective to “bring about the complete independence and unity of Korea.” The UN General Assembly had repeatedly resolved to unify Korea over the past three years and the NSC determined that the United States needed to continue to support that objective.⁸ On September 1, 1950, the same day that Truman elucidated American aims in Korea, denounced preventive war, and insisted that the U.S. was fighting for peace, not conquest, the NSC issued Report 81 and agreed that, if the UN could accomplish its objectives “without substantial risk of general war with the Soviet Union or Communist China, it would be in our interest to advocate the pressing of the United Nations action to this conclusion.”⁹

The NSC acknowledged that crossing the 38th Parallel might provoke Chinese or Soviet intervention and the report clarified that “It would not be in our national interest... to take action in Korea which would involve a substantial risk of general war.” The NSC also discouraged unilateral action since it would not be in the nation's interests “to take action in Korea which did not have the support of the great majority of the United Nations,” even if it did not risk general war.

⁷ James and Wells, 181.

⁸ See, for example, the UN Resolutions of November 14, 1947, December 12, 1948, and October 21, 1949.

⁹ NSC Report 81, “United States Courses of Action With Respect to Korea,” September 1, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, PSF, HSTPL.

Nevertheless, the NSC presumed that China and the Soviet Union did not want a general war over Korea either, and the report did not think the Soviets or the Chinese would try to reoccupy North Korea even though the USSR was not likely to “passively accept” a Korea outside of their control.¹⁰

NSC 81 concluded, therefore, that “The United Nations forces have a legal basis for conducting operations north of the 38th parallel to compel the withdrawal of the North Korean forces behind this line or to defeat these forces. The U. N. Commander should be authorized to conduct military operations... in pursuance of a roll-back, north of the 38th parallel for the purpose of destroying the North Korean forces” provided that Soviet or Chinese forces had not entered or announced entry into the war.¹¹ Fortified with the recommendations of the National Security Council, President Truman approved NSC 81 on September 11 and the administration began making plans to cross the 38th Parallel.

South Korean Pressure

The decision to convert containment into rollback and cross the 38th Parallel was not completely informed by internal deliberations, however. U.S. strategists also faced immense pressure from the ROK to cross the line and liberate all of Korea. South Korean President Syngman Rhee and Korean Ambassador John M. Chang, in particular, gave U.S. officials a hard time. Try as they might, the State Department struggled to keep South Korea’s loose cannons from misfiring. The U.S. Ambassador to Korea, John J. Muccio, found it especially difficult to dissuade Rhee “from making harmful public statements and actions.” In late August 1950, for example, Rhee drafted a message to the fifty-three United Nations supporting the ROK saying that his government would not recognize a negotiated settlement with the DPRK and that South Korean forces would not stop

¹⁰ NSC Report 81, “United States Courses of Action With Respect to Korea,” September 1, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, PSF, HSTPL.

¹¹ NSC Report 81, “United States Courses of Action With Respect to Korea,” September 1, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, PSF, HSTPL.

at the 38th Parallel.¹² Throughout the summer, Rhee had repeatedly announced that no peace could be maintained if Korea remained divided and, in a joint press conference with U.S. General John H. Church in September, Rhee announced that the UN advance “must not stop” until the communists were driven entirely out of Korea.¹³

For ROK officials, the 38th Parallel was a meaningless imposition on Korean sovereignty and unity – a foreign fence that Allied governments had established for convenience. Even before MacArthur’s forces landed at Inchon, Ambassador Chang told the press that the ROK “no longer recognized the existence of the 38th Parallel” and, in a conversation with Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk on September 8, Chang declared that South Korea would “not be satisfied with any solution which did not envisage the complete subduing of the Communist military forces and the removal of the North Korean regime.” Rusk explained that the U.S. could not take a definite position on the issue since the decision about reunification was the UN’s to choose. He hoped Chang would not make any more statements that might commit the U.S. to a stance it was not prepared to make.¹⁴ Chang did not oblige.

After the invasion at Inchon and as UN forces rapidly recaptured South Korean territory, Chang told Dean Acheson on September 21 that UN forces “should not lose sight of the ultimate goal of crushing the communist invaders of Korea.” By invading South Korea, North Korea had violated the UN Charter, threatened world peace, and “caused incalculable damage in terms of precious human lives and in terms of property,” Chang reminded him. “We feel that these aggressors must be punished for their crimes, and we further feel that the roots of any future

¹² John J. Muccio to Dean Acheson, September 4, 1950; Policy Concerning UN Crossing of the 38th Parallel, Summer 1950, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

¹³ Dean Rusk to John M. Allison, July 13, 1950; Dean Acheson to John J. Muccio, September 11, 1950; Policy Concerning UN Crossing of the 38th Parallel, Summer 1950, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

¹⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, September 8, 1950; Policy Concerning UN Crossing of the 38th Parallel, Summer 1950, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

aggression of the kind brought upon the Republic of Korea and its people should be obliterated,” Chang declared. As a result, the ROK thought “the 38th parallel should not be considered in any of the discussions of the future of Korea.” The parallel was meaningless. It was a temporary division to facilitate the surrender of Japanese forces, Chang explained, and it divided a homogenous people with common customs, language, and economies. Moreover, Soviet imperialism had blocked Korean unification and “defied the will of the Korean people” in order “to enslave them” and Chang hoped that UN forces would “march beyond the 38th parallel, as the only way of attaining the intent of the decision of the Security Council to restore peace and security in Korea.”¹⁵

By September 27, as MacArthur’s forces fought to recapture Seoul, Chang informed Acheson that North Korean forces were trying to ruin the capital and hoped that “the city can be rescued without too much destruction.” The fighting also proved, therefore, that North Korean forces were wicked and had to be overthrown. “They are brutal; they are inhuman. They have evidenced regard for neither life nor property and have shown particular disregard for monuments of historical importance,” Chang declared. Considering the nature of their enemy and the destruction of southern Korea, Chang was disturbed by talk of a negotiated settlement to halt UN forces from advancing beyond the 38th Parallel. “It is unthinkable that there could be entertainment of the idea that there could be a basis for negotiated settlement with these communist criminals,” he told Acheson. UN fighting was vain, Chang reckoned, if they were not going to reunify all of Korea, and a negotiated settlement would merely allow the communists to gain sanctuary behind the parallel and escape punishment. The people of South Korea would never tolerate this, Chang announced. He demanded total victory in the Korean War and the total defeat of North Korean forces: “the communist aggressors must be completely subdued and disarmed; ...they must surrender

¹⁵ John M. Chang to Dean Acheson, September 21, 1950; Warren Austin to Dean Acheson, September 22, 1950; Policy Concerning UN Crossing of the 38th Parallel, Summer 1950, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

unconditionally,” he pressed, and the ROK should assume the jurisdiction of all Korea after hostilities ended.¹⁶

For South Korea, therefore, the Korean War was *not* a limited war to contain communism, it was an unlimited war to reunify the peninsula and the ROK believed that it had a moral justification to do so. ROK officials considered the DPRK an illegitimate pretender and saw KPA forces as criminals. They demanded the unconditional surrender of their enemies and fought to expel the communists entirely from Korea. For the ROK, the war was never about containing communism or restoring the status quo antebellum, they demanded total victory and were willing to pursue it at any cost.

ROK attitudes and rhetoric contrasted sharply with American attitudes and values, however. For the Truman administration, the Korean War was a limited war to contain communism and restore South Korea’s sovereignty and freedom. The President and his advisors were not prepared and did not want another total or world war and they certainly were not willing to pursue their objectives at any price. Thus, while Rhee and Chang argued that the 38th Parallel was irrelevant and demanded that UN forces cross it and invade North Korea, the Truman administration deliberated. Truman had committed the U.S. to defend South Korea and now, the ally the U.S. had sworn to protect and support exhorted them to go on the offensive.

The pressure and temptation to initiate a new phase of the war and invade North Korea ultimately overcame the reticence U.S. strategists felt about escalating and expanding the war. They could not resist the allure of completely defeating communism in Korea and reunifying the peninsula under a democratic regime. When victory over communism in Korea seemed possible and

¹⁶ John M. Chang to Dean Acheson, September 27, 1950; Policy Concerning UN Crossing of the 38th Parallel, Summer 1950, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

justified, the Truman administration could not resist taking the gamble and accepted the costs and risks.

US Decision

On September 27, 1950, Truman approved a directive authorizing MacArthur to follow NSC 81/1. With the approval of the Secretary of State and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, MacArthur received orders “to conduct military operations... north of the 38th parallel in Korea” and “destroy North Korean forces,” provided that major Soviet or Chinese forces had not entered or threatened to enter North Korea or counter U.S. military operations. “Under no circumstances,” however, was MacArthur to cross the border into Chinese or Soviet territory. Air and naval operations against Manchuria or Soviet territory were also prohibited. If Soviet forces did enter the war, MacArthur was instructed to “assume the defense, make no move to aggravate the situation and report to Washington.” If Chinese forces entered the war, MacArthur was supposed to continue to fight “as long as action by your forces offers a reasonable chance of successful resistance.” MacArthur was also authorized to restore the Government of the Republic of Korea “As soon as the military situation permits,” but political questions about sovereignty over North Korea were to be decided by the UN.¹⁷

The new Secretary of Defense, George C. Marshall, followed up the directive on September 29 and gave MacArthur a green light, if not a blank check, for his operations in North Korea. While the administration had issued clear instructions in the case of Chinese or Soviet intervention, Marshall wanted MacArthur “to feel unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of 38th parallel.” It was better to go north because of military necessity, the Secretary explained, than

¹⁷ George C. Marshall to Harry S. Truman, With Attached Directive to Commander of United Nations Forces in Korea, September 27, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, PSF, HSTPL.

because of a UN vote on crossing the parallel.¹⁸ Thereafter, MacArthur regarded “all of Korea open for our mil[itary] operations” and he interpreted Marshall’s message to mean that Washington would not interfere in his mission.¹⁹ The goal for the United States in the Korean War was now, officially, to establish “a unified, independent and democratic Govt of Korea.”²⁰

In response, MacArthur told the JCS that he intended to “scrupulously” follow the directive and restore international peace and security to Korea.²¹ On October 1, he broadcast an ultimatum to North Korean forces which stated:

The early and total defeat and complete destruction of your armed forces and war making potential is now inevitable. In order that the decisions of the United Nations may be carried out with a minimum of further loss of life and destruction of property, I, as the United Nations Commander in Chief, call upon you and the forces under your command, in whatever part of Korea situated, forthwith to lay down your arms and cease hostilities under such military supervision as I may direct... I shall anticipate your early decision upon this opportunity to avoid the further useless shedding of blood and destruction of property.²²

MacArthur thus called for the unconditional surrender of North Korean forces and, when they ignored the ultimatum, he moved forward with his plans to “accomplish the military objective of destroying them by entry into North Korea.”²³

The U.S. carefully coordinated the diplomatic and military pieces of its new rollback policy. With MacArthur’s approval, ROK forces crossed the 38th Parallel into North Korea on October 1. Meanwhile, at the United Nations, Acheson and Ambassador Austin persuaded eight friendly nations, led by the UK, to sponsor a resolution on September 30 that changed the UN objectives in the war. Since June, the UN had aimed to restore the status quo antebellum but on October 7, the

¹⁸ George C. Marshall to Douglas MacArthur, September 29, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, NAF, HSTPL.

¹⁹ Douglas MacArthur to Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 30, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, NAF, HSTPL; James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 184.

²⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff to Douglas MacArthur, October 6, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, NAF, HSTPL.

²¹ Douglas MacArthur to Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 23, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, NAF, HSTPL.

²² Douglas MacArthur to Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 28, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, NAF, HSTPL.

²³ Douglas MacArthur to Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 28, 1950; *The Korean War and Its Origins*, NAF, HSTPL.

United Nations passed a resolution that pledged to liberate North Korea. The U.S. Eighth Army crossed the 38th Parallel the two days later.²⁴

With the invasion of North Korea, the United States had fully reverted to the ends and means of total victory and total war. The U.S. was now fighting for regime change in Korea and planned to roll-back and decisively annihilate North Korean forces or compel their unconditional surrender. Morally and strategically, therefore, the United States had resumed the pursuit of victory at practically any cost.

INCIDENTS WITH THE USSR

The Truman administration still wanted to avoid provoking a wider war with China and the Soviet Union, however, but that became more difficult as UN forces moved closer to the Soviet and Manchurian borders. Once again, the war in the air, where boundaries were harder to regulate, threatened to ignite an international incident into blazing world war. On October 8, two USAF F-80 Shooting Star fighter jets violated the Soviet frontier and strafed a Soviet airdrome or airfield at Dry River near Sukhya Rechka, about 100 km from the Soviet-Korean border. The Soviets protested and held the U.S. responsible for damages. They demanded strict punishment of those responsible as well as reassurance from the U.S. government that such provocative actions would not happen again.²⁵

On this occasion, the U.S. consented to Soviet demands. In a report to the UN Secretary General, the United States confirmed the Soviet version of events. Even though the American pilots had been specifically briefed not to violate the Manchurian or Soviet borders, they had attacked the

²⁴ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 186–87.

²⁵ Alan Kirk to Dean Acheson, October 9, 1950; Alan Kirk to Dean Acheson, October 10, 1950; Military Incidents Involving the Soviet Union, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL. See also, Notes of Phone Conversation Between Dean Acheson and Thomas Finletter, October 12, 1950; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

airfield because of navigation error and poor judgment since the attack took place without positive identification of the target. As a consequence, the USAF had relieved the group commander and taken disciplinary action against the two pilots. The U.S. government formally expressed regret and, as evidence of its good faith (and desire not to see the incident enflamed further), it offered to pay for any damages determined by a UN commission to have been inflicted on Soviet property.²⁶

Like the bombing of Rashin near the Soviet border in August or the shooting of the Soviet plane in September, the strafing of the Soviet airfield in October did not explode into full-scale war with the USSR. But these incidents, despite precautions, training, and warnings, showed how easily and inadvertently the war in Korea could have expanded into a wider war. The opportunities and risks of war with the Soviet Union and China increased further as UN forces continued north.

CHINESE INTERVENTION

American and South Korean forces captured Pyongyang on October 19 and one week later, ROK soldiers reached the Yalu River, the northern border of North Korea.²⁷ Peiping warned, however, that it would not stand idly by and let the U.S. overthrow the DPRK. The government was still bitter about U.S. support for Chiang and the nationalists during the Chinese Civil War and they found U.S. promises that it would withdraw troops from Korea as soon as a stable government was formed “all very well but not convincing.”²⁸ On October 3, Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai told the Indian Ambassador, K. M. Panikkar, that if UN forces crossed the 38th Parallel, China would send troops to defend North Korea. China would not send troops, however, if only South

²⁶ Note to UN Security Council, October 19, 1950; Military Incidents Involving the Soviet Union, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

²⁷ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 188.

²⁸ Vinton Chapin to Dean Acheson, October 3, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

Korean forces crossed the border.²⁹ Panikkar passed the threat along that “any transgression of 38th parallel by US forces will not be passively tolerated by Chinese government” but, because of his previous reports, U.S. officials did not take him seriously.³⁰

Other State Department sources also revealed that China would fight if the 38th Parallel was crossed. The Chinese interpreted America’s invasion of North Korea as aggression and Zhou insisted that China would defend itself even though the war would likely destroy Chinese industry. Another Chinese officer stated that China had no choice but to fight if the parallel was crossed even though war with the U.S. would likely set back China’s development half a century or more. If China did not resist, he feared it would fall under American control forever.³¹

The State Department also received Dutch reports which claimed that China did not want war, but if UN forces penetrated deeply into North Korea, China would have to do something, and the Dutch warned that the Chinese had one million of their best troops in Manchuria. The Dutch also quoted Panikkar as saying that the U.S. was clearly determined to pursue its war-like course since it retained Secretary Matthews after his preventive war speech.³² Meanwhile, the Chinese press renewed its attacks on the United States and charged the Truman administration with aggression and imperialism.³³

Some U.S. officials thought China was bluffing, though. The American Consul General in Hong Kong regarded communist China as a Soviet deputy and suggested that the USSR could not

²⁹ Julius C. Holmes to Dean Acheson, October 3, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³⁰ William Butterworth to Dean Acheson, October 7, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL; James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 185.

³¹ Vinton Chapin to Dean Acheson, October 3, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³² Vinton Chapin to Dean Acheson, October 3, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³³ Vinton Chapin to Dean Acheson, October 17, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

afford the political dangers of “pushing its most important satellite” into a devastating war, unless it was prepared to back it up with the Red Army. He also thought Zhou had made his threats indirectly to Panikkar so that China would not have to back up its boast if its bluff was called. A sudden intervention did not make sense, either. If China was prepared to intervene, he reasoned, a public warning would be a more effective deterrent. “We cannot perceive any advantage to their permitting issues to remain in doubt until US forces have crossed and then intervening,” he wrote to Acheson. A sudden intervention also contradicted the Chinese practice of “careful psychological preparation in advance of military action.” Furthermore, the Consul General observed that communist propaganda in Korea had been decreasing and Chinese leaders did not appear to be preparing their people for major war. He therefore reported that the Chinese people and their government did not want to be embroiled in a foreign war, especially one on behalf of the USSR but he admitted that the government in Hong Kong had no actual information on Chinese intentions.³⁴

Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk had also asked Ambassador Chang in early September if he thought China would intervene in Korea and Chang thought China would stay out. China “would not want to make open war against the United Nations,” he explained, and would probably limit its involvement to supplying “volunteers” to North Korean Forces.³⁵

China had a lot of “volunteers” though, and the United States had received plenty of other premonitions that China was prepared to use them. The State Department, CIA, and MacArthur’s headquarters had all known about large troop movements in south China since April and at the end of August, MacArthur’s own chief of intelligence, General Charles Willoughby, estimated that Chinese strength in Manchuria had increased to 246,000 regular forces and 374,000 militia security

³⁴ Wilkinson to Dean Acheson, October 8, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, September 8, 1950; Policy Concerning UN Crossing of the 38th Parallel, Summer 1950, Box 6, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

forces. By mid-October, various sources indicated that there were 450,000 Chinese regulars in Manchuria although MacArthur counted only 300,000, which was closer to the CIA's figures.³⁶

But despite the growing number of Chinese soldiers in Manchuria and the risk that China might deploy them if U.S. operations threatened China's border or overthrew the DPRK, U.S. officials felt sure China would not intervene. In fact, the day the UN issued its resolution on liberating North Korea, the JCS had to give MacArthur instructions about Chinese involvement because, to that point, neither NSC 81/1, nor the directive implementing it on September 27 specifically told MacArthur what to do in the case of Chinese intervention in Korea. Accordingly, the JCS directed MacArthur to continue fighting as long operations offered "a reasonable chance of success" but he was supposed to obtain authorization from Washington before taking any military action against Chinese territory.³⁷ Meanwhile, the CIA reported on October 12 that Chinese entry in the war was not likely in 1950 and MacArthur insisted that the Chinese were no threat. He claimed that U.S. air forces would devastate the Chinese if they came south, and he continued to believe that neither Peiping nor Moscow would oppose his march to the Yalu. On October 15, when Truman met MacArthur for a conference on Wake Island, the General confidently told the President that China would not intervene and would not threaten American troops.³⁸ "What are the chances for Chinese or Soviet interference?" Truman asked. "Very little," MacArthur replied. China had no air force and "if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter," he announced. The Russians were not a threat either. Even with their air capabilities, the Soviets were "probably no match for our Air Force" and, if Russia combined its air forces with the Chinese ground forces, their coordination would be so "flimsy" that MacArthur thought the Russians

³⁶ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 184–85.

³⁷ Correspondence between Harry S. Truman and Douglas MacArthur; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

³⁸ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 188, 191, 199–200.

“would bomb the Chinese as often as they would bomb us.”³⁹ As Truman later recorded, “The General assured the President that the victory was won in Korea, that Japan was ready for a peace treaty and that the Chinese Communists would not attack... He again said the Chinese Commies would not attack, that we had won the war and that we could send a Division to Europe from Korea in January 1951.”⁴⁰ There were clear reasons to question MacArthur’s judgment, but no one dared. MacArthur had been right many times before and his invasion at Inchon had been executed and succeeded so magnificently that it was difficult for the JCS or anyone else to challenge him thereafter.⁴¹

Unbeknownst to U.S. officials, however, Chinese armies were already in North Korea. China had secretly begun moving troops across the Yalu River on October 8, the day after the UN resolution and the day before U.S. forces crossed the parallel. In the next two weeks, UN forces began to encounter increased Chinese resistance and even Chinese units but figured that they were “volunteers” supporting North Korean troops. On October 15, four American F-51 Mustangs took anti-aircraft fire from the Manchurian side of the border near Sinuiju and one aircraft was shot down. The next day, UN forces encountered about 2,500 Chinese soldiers around the Chosen and Fusen Dams while another 5,000 Chinese crossed the Yalu on October 20 and deployed near the Sui-Ho Dam.⁴² On October 25, the Chinese began a large offensive that caught UN forces off-guard. The rollback of North Korean forces had provoked communist Chinese leaders who decided to intervene with considerable force. By the end of October more than 180,000 Chinese soldiers were positioned south of the Yalu and by the middle of November there were more than 270,000

³⁹ “Substance of Statements Made at Wake Island Conference,” October 15, 1950; Administration File, the Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

⁴⁰ Longhand Note of President Harry S. Truman, November 25, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

⁴¹ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 176.

⁴² Dean Acheson to Warren Austin, November 5, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

Chinese troops in Korea. On November 25, China launched a massive offensive, sending 180,000 forces to attack the U.S. Eighth Army on the west side of the peninsula while 120,000 soldiers attacked the east side.⁴³ The offensive inaugurated a new phase of the war that ended the liberation of North Korea and threw American goals and strategies into confusion.

⁴³ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 187–88, 194, 200.

War With China

China's offensives in October and November 1950 provided another inflection point in the Korean War and presented the Truman administration with another major strategic and moral decision. After North Korea's invasion in June, the administration had to decide whether the United States would intervene to resist communist aggression. In September, after repelling North Korean forces and restoring the status quo antebellum, the administration had to decide whether UN forces would cross the 38th Parallel and expand the war to liberate North Korea. Now, the administration had to decide again what the United States was fighting for and how far it was willing to go to achieve its goals. However, China's intervention divided U.S. strategists who felt conflicted about China's intentions and, consequently, the best way for the United States and the United Nations to respond. Not knowing what Peiping wanted, many U.S. strategists were slow to take the invasion seriously and argued that China's involvement in Korea changed nothing. Others, who were equally unsure about what Peiping intended, reacted gravely to the invasion and argued that China's involvement changed everything. Nevertheless, now that China had joined the war, the Yalu River had become the new 38th Parallel and the Truman administration had to decide whether the U.S. should fight a total war for total victory, a limited war for limited victory, or withdraw to fight another day.

Total victory meant rolling back communism, defeating Chinese forces and, potentially, liberating China. To do that, the U.S. would have to expand and escalate its operations, commit to total war, and bomb, blockade, and invade China. Total war and total victory though, could enable the United States to overthrow the Chinese Revolution and democratize China, just as the U.S. had done in Germany and Japan. However, they would also incur the catastrophic costs of a general war on the Asian mainland which could turn into a nuclear war if the Soviet Union became involved.

Limited victory meant containing communism and preserving the freedom, independence, and sovereignty of South Korea or a unified Korea. To do that, the U.S. would have to fight a limited war and restrict its operations in and against China. A limited war would have more limited costs and save American lives, and it could still save some portion of Korea, but it would also lead to a stalemate with China.

Withdrawal meant abandoning Korea and leaving the Koreans to solve their own problems in the face of Chinese and perhaps Soviet intervention. By withdrawing its forces and de-escalating the war, the United States could avoid the casualties of a general or limited war, save American lives, and prepare for the next communist aggression or engagement elsewhere. But withdrawal would also mean defeat and a measure of disgrace for the United States.

The Truman administration ultimately chose the middle or moderate path of containment and limited war against China. Deterred by the immeasurable costs of a general or total war against China on the Asian mainland and dismayed by the spread of communist aggression if the U.S. left Korea, U.S. strategists selected the Goldilocks option between total victory and abject defeat. As tempting as liberating Korea or reversing the Chinese Revolution might have been, total victory against China seemed, if not impossible, then certainly immoral considering the intolerable casualties that the United States would have to exact and endure in order to win. On the other hand, by abandoning Korea the United States would be abandoning the Koreans and, while defeat was distasteful enough on its own to U.S. strategists, they found the humiliating blend of defeat, dishonor, and appeasement repellent. As a result, the Truman administration chose to limit its operations and strategies in Korea and China by localizing the conflict, limiting the air war to precision attacks in North Korea and only hot pursuit in Manchuria, and rejecting nuclear weapons. These substitutes for victory contained communism and ultimately preserved the Republic of Korea,

but they also constrained U.S. operations, terminated plans to liberate North Korea, and ended the war in a stalemate.

Despite China's sudden invasion, some U.S. officials were not quick to change their ambitions or expectations. After China began attacking UN forces at the end of October, neither the White House, nor the JCS or NSC ordered MacArthur to fall back to defensive positions and the general refused to change his war aims. As D. Clayton James has observed, MacArthur was slow to realize that China was now the main enemy. On October 30, five days after the Chinese offensive began, he told the President: "Operations in Korea are proceeding according to plan and while as we draw close to the Manchurian border enemy resistance has somewhat stiffened, I do not think this represents a strong defense in depth such as would materially retard the achievement of our border objective." MacArthur still thought victory was imminent, in fact, he proposed to remove American soldiers as soon as possible, "that we may save our men from the rigors of winter climate."¹ The General thought he could end the war and bring the boys home by Thanksgiving.² The next week, MacArthur reported to the UN:

The United Nations forces in Korea are continuing their drive to the north and their efforts to destroy further the effectiveness of the enemy as a fighting force are proving successful. However, presently in certain areas of Korea, the United Nations forces are meeting a new foe. It is apparent to our fighting forces, and our intelligence agencies have confirmed the fact, that the United Nations are presently in hostile contact with Chinese Communist military units deployed for action against the forces of the United Command.³

MacArthur thus downplayed the significance of China's invasion in October, just as he had downplayed the risk of Chinese intervention. The general admitted, however, that China's

¹ Douglas MacArthur to Harry S. Truman, with draft letter to MacArthur by George Elsey, October 30, 1950; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

² James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 194–95.

³ Dean Acheson to Warren Austin, November 5, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

November offensive created a new war, and his forces adopted a defensive stance.⁴ War with China did not change MacArthur's objectives though – he would have to adjust his military operations, but his goal remained the liberation of Korea.

CHINESE INTENTIONS

U.S. strategists also hesitated to change their own goals and strategies because they were conflicted between rollback and containment – between their desires to defeat communism and their desires to avoid another world war. They were also unsure of China's aims and intentions. Not knowing what Peiping wanted and how far it was willing to go, U.S. strategists were not sure how to define victory against China and how much rollback and containment would cost.

As Dean Acheson explained on November 13 to his British counterpart, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, Washington could not read Peiping's purposes. The Secretary of State listed ten motivations or reasons for China's intervention: Perhaps China was merely demonstrating that it would not stand by while the UN attacked North Korea or possibly Peiping wanted to occupy the border region and salvage some North Korean territory. Maybe China was trying to establish a cordon sanitaire within Korea or Peiping could have been concerned about losing hydro-electric power and was trying to defend the installations on the Yalu River. Perhaps the offensive was a token effort to support North Korea or to assuage Soviet pressure to help North Korea or maybe the Chinese really believed that UN forces planned to attack Manchuria and so they attacked out of fear. Maybe China intended to reoccupy North Korea down to the 38th Parallel and restore the DPRK or it intended to expel UN forces from Korea altogether. More broadly, maybe China's intervention was part the Kremlin's broader program for East Asia and Moscow and Peiping possibly wanted to strain or tie down U.S. military resources so that the Americans could not help

⁴ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 200–201.

out in other areas that the communists planned to attack. Any one of those possibilities might have informed Chinese decision making or China's intervention could have been motivated by some combination of them.⁵

Based on a telegram from Peiping on November 11, the Netherlands Embassy suggested to the State Department that China's intervention was motivated "by a genuine fear of aggression in Korea by US troops" and Chinese leaders worried especially about American aims in Manchuria. The telegram also intimated that China's long-term goal was to establish an independent Korean government that would not pose a threat to China while their short-term goal was to protect the Chinese frontier. The Dutch noted, for instance, that China did not immediately intervene after UN troops crossed the parallel but did intervene when they came close to the Yalu River. China had also halted its offensive once UN troops had withdrawn to a line approximately fifty miles from the border. Dutch officials therefore speculated that China wanted to safeguard its frontiers by establishing a buffer zone in Korea.⁶

As they received signs that China was limiting its operations as well, U.S. strategists were encouraged to constrain their own efforts. In mid-November, the Netherlands Embassy asserted that because Chinese propaganda continued to emphasize "the volunteer aspects of their intervention, the Chinese communists will continue to try to avoid open hostilities." China would only engage the UN openly if it could represent UN attacks against Chinese soil as "open aggression" (even if the UN retaliated due to Chinese provocations), thereby maximizing "Chinese domestic and international Communist support." Indeed, the Dutch suggested that air raids from

⁵ Dean Acheson to Ernest Bevin, November 13, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁶ U. Alexis Johnson, Memo of Conversation, November 14, 1950; Vinton Chapin to Dean Acheson, November 14, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

Manchurian bases may have been designed to provoke just that kind of UN reaction.⁷ The major takeaway for the State Department, however, was that Peiping did not want all-out war either and was localizing the conflict in its own way.

Alan Kirk, the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, likewise suggested that China did not want total war with the United Nations. In November, he pointed out that the Chinese government had not made any formal statement committing itself to defending Korea and it continued to emphasize the role of Chinese “volunteers.” Kirk noted that “the nature of this type [of] intervention misleads no one” but he also asserted that Chinese volunteerism provided Peiping with a way out if the UN was not intimidated by the implied threat of large-scale intervention. Chinese news reports, which were targeted for domestic consumption as much as international impact, also indicated that the Chinese people did not want a foreign war. Furthermore, Kirk observed that China did not assist North Korea when UN forces were trapped at Pusan, or after UN forces counterattacked at Inchon, or when it could have halted UN forces at the 38th Parallel, so it did not make sense for China to now enter the war all-in. “Despite their truculence and bombast,” Kirk wrote, China had barely consolidated political power and had not proceeded far enough with its own economic and social reforms to now plunge the country into total war against the most powerful nation in the world.⁸

Kirk also gave evidence that the USSR did not want a war between China and the UN either. If the Soviet Svengali really was masterminding developments, Kirk told Acheson that it was also possible that the Chinese offensive represented the final Soviet effort to salvage something from its miscalculation in ordering North Korean aggression. But although the Soviets also shared a border

⁷ U. Alexis Johnson, Memo of Conversation, November 14, 1950; Vinton Chapin to Dean Acheson, November 14, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁸ Alan Kirk to Dean Acheson, November 14, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

with Korea, they had not publicized the participation of Soviet “volunteers” in the war and Kirk argued that, while the Soviets were using the Chinese as “catspaws,” the USSR was still unwilling to ignite World War III prematurely. Kirk concluded then that neither China nor the Soviet Union wanted a general war with the United Nations and certainly not another world war. He therefore believed that China would not pour troops into Korea indefinitely and determined that the scale of Chinese intervention would depend on the force exerted by the UN and ROK.⁹ China’s offensive was a proportional response and if the UN limited the war on its end, China would likely do the same.

Soviet intentions remained enigmatic and moot, however. The CIA reported on November 9 that there was not enough evidence to suggest that the USSR would commit forces to Korea, but the involvement of Chinese forces aided by the Soviet Union, indicated that “the USSR considers the Korean situation of sufficient importance to warrant the risk of general war.”¹⁰ A month later, the CIA issued a report on “Probable Soviet Moves to Exploit the Present Situation” and warned that beyond the danger of Soviet-Communist action in places like Germany, Iran, and Indochina, “there remains a possibility that the Soviet Union may seize upon the present crisis to precipitate a general war with the United States.” Soviet propaganda emphasized that Korea could turn into another world war and the Kremlin continued making military preparations. By taking these steps, the CIA explained, Moscow could be trying “to frighten the West and to reduce our will to resist.” It was also possible that “the Soviet Union [had] already made a decision for general war and [was] getting ready for it.”¹¹

⁹ Alan Kirk to Dean Acheson, November 14, 1950; Information and Estimates re Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

¹⁰ Report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Central Intelligence Agency, November 9, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

¹¹ Summary of Report, December 13, 1950; Administration File, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

Without knowing what the enemy wanted, the United States did not know how to resist, and U.S. strategists contended with one another about how the U.S. should fight a war against China. A few officials and commanders argued that the U.S. should try to defeat Chinese forces, others believed that the U.S. should fall back and focus on defending Korean territory, while a few pushed for the United States to withdraw entirely and leave Korea. The Joint Chiefs of Staff laid out the situation and the available options in a report on November 9. The JCS estimated that the Chinese had so much strength in Korea that only “a determined military operation” could defeat them. However, a sustained campaign in Korea would drain U.S. military capabilities and probably American morale as well, although the JCS did not mention it, while “the continued commitment of U.S. forces in Korea” would also cost the U.S. “more useful strategic deployment” elsewhere. They did not think Chinese and North Korean forces could drive the UN from Korea unless they were assisted by the USSR but, if the Soviets did join the fight, the JCS counseled that “U.S. forces should be withdrawn from Korea as it would then be evident that World War III is imminent” and Korea was not the optimal location to fight third world war.¹²

The JCS thus outlined three courses of action for UN forces that corresponded roughly with victory, stalemate, and defeat. Victory would involve forcing the conflict “to a successful conclusion in Korea;” a stalemate meant establishing and maintaining “a defensive position on a line short of the Korean border; while defeat meant “Withdrawal.” At present the JCS did not think that “global war [was] imminent,” only that “the risk of global war is increased” but they recommended that the U.S. make every effort to resolve the problem of Chinese intervention by political methods,

¹² Report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Central Intelligence Agency, November 9, 1950; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

preferably through the UN, while making preparations for a wider conflict based on the fact that the risk of global war was increased.¹³

WITHDRAW

Perhaps the strongest argument for withdrawal came from James S. Lay Jr., the Executive Director of the National Security Council. He asserted that the Soviet Union, not China, was the real threat, and he advised the NSC to withdraw from Korea in order to prepare for the larger inevitable conflict with the USSR. In a memorandum on November 15, he explained that Moscow, not Peiping was orchestrating the Chinese offensive. “The one and only source from which the United States and the United Nations need expect aggression either directly or indirectly is from Soviet Russia,” he declared, “Aggression is turned on and off at will by the Russian leaders... The aggressive actions of Communist China are the indirect acts of Soviet Russia and should be so regarded.” Lay also argued that the U.S. and its allies could not defeat direct Russian aggression and, therefore, they could not afford “to become involved in a general war or a continuing local war with Communist China in North Korea or elsewhere.” As a result, Lay offered four possible courses of action.¹⁴

First, UN forces could continue to probe north of the 38th Parallel “to destroy the war capabilities of the North Koreans,” force their withdrawal, and restore order throughout Korea. However, as long as China continued to send volunteers into North Korea, supplied and supported by the USSR, Lay thought the Korean War was likely to turn into a long-term “sanguinary local war.” And he worried that the war could become so costly that, after twelve months, it would

¹³ Report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Central Intelligence Agency, November 9, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

¹⁴ James S. Lay, Jr., to Senior National Security Council Staff, With Attachment, November 15, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

“seriously jeopardize the ability of the U.S. to survive if war with Russia should follow at that point.” A second option was to retreat back to the 38th Parallel although Lay noted that there was nothing to suggest that holding the parallel would be better than holding the present line in North Korea or at the Yalu River except that UN aircraft could attack enemy bases and supply lines; at the moment, they could not do so without attacking Manchuria. Third, the UN could continue to build up its forces and do whatever was necessary “to defeat and eject the Chinese communists from Korea.” Victory in Korea, however, would likely require “general war with China, and a grave probability of a general war with Russia from Korea” which would prove incredibly costly. Fourth, the U.S. could negotiate a settlement through the UN. A military compromise short of total victory would be embarrassing at home and abroad, Lay admitted, but military necessity, national security, and “the opportunity to select the time and place most favorable to the U.S. and its allies if a general war with Russia should prove unavoidable” made negotiation a good option.¹⁵

In conclusion, Lay maintained that “Soviet Russia is determined to retain a Communist government in Korea and to that end is prepared to accept the risk of global war if need be” and, if the USSR was prepared to risk a global war, the United States needed to prepare for imminent conflict. Lay recommended, therefore, that the U.S. “proceed by every honorable means to effect a withdrawal of its forces from Korea at the earliest possible date.”¹⁶ Clearly, Lay was certain that the Soviet Union would attack the United States and, sooner, rather than later. In fact, he was so certain that he recommended that the U.S. cut its losses and leave Korea in order to better brace itself for the inevitable future war against the Russians rather than wasting strength in the current war with

¹⁵ James S. Lay, Jr., to Senior National Security Council Staff, With Attachment, November 15, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

¹⁶ James S. Lay, Jr., to Senior National Security Council Staff, With Attachment, November 15, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

China and North Korea. In that sense, Lay did not so much renounce victory and its costs in Korea as much as he primed the NSC for the price of victory against the USSR.

In another memorandum just two days later, Lay told the NSC that he still hoped that UN forces could successfully drive communist forces out of Korea without having to bomb Manchuria but, if they could not defeat the communists, the best thing MacArthur could do (without bombing Manchuria) was to hold the line as long as possible in Korea. If UN forces could not hold the line and China compelled the UN to retire from Korea, Lay thought the U.S. should take action through the UN to “openly and effectively hold Russia responsible for the action in Korea.” Lay did not fully explain what it would mean to hold Russia accountable but he implied that the UN would denounce Soviet aggression and threaten to impose diplomatic or military consequences. Lay admitted that that would be “a very grave step,” but he concluded that “unless the prestige of the United Nations, built up at so much cost in the Korean war, is to be lost, and the cause of peace correspondingly harmed, the United Nations forces cannot accept a military defeat in Korea without making it clear to the world that such defeat is caused by the Soviet Union.”¹⁷ In short, Lay recommended that the U.S. refrain from bombing Manchuria and, instead, hold the line in Korea. If UN forces could not hold the line, then the U.S. should hold Russia responsible and, potentially, be willing to begin a war with the Soviets.

LIMIT AND LOCALIZE THE WAR

The rest of the National Security Council did not want to abandon Korea so readily, however. On November 28, President Truman met with the council to discuss the American situation and strategies in Korea. MacArthur’s recent reports about China’s offensive indicated that

¹⁷ James S. Lay, Jr. to Senior National Security Council Staff, With Attachment, November 17, 1950; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

the UN faced a new war with new threats, challenges, and choices which offered the chance to revisit American ends and means in Korea. The Joint Chiefs of Staff did not think MacArthur needed a new directive, however.¹⁸

Secretary Marshall then read a memorandum by the Defense, State, and Treasury secretaries which called for the U.S. to limit its operations in order to avoid a general war with China. The three secretaries established that the Korean War was now complicated by Chinese “aggression” which, they believed, was largely directed by the Kremlin. They argued, though, that the U.S. should not hold the USSR publicly responsible nor fall into the Russian trap by becoming involved in a general war with China. Instead, the secretaries recommended that the U.S. fulfill the UN’s obligations to resist aggression and preserve the independence and sovereignty of Korea by holding the line on the peninsula while doing everything it could to limit the war. U.S. forces should not enter Chinese territory or solicit the support of Chinese nationalist forces and the secretaries again stressed that, above all else, the U.S. should not become involved in a war with China. The memorandum elided the degree to which the United States was already at war with China, but the JCS agreed that the U.S. should not become involved in a general war and should avoid conflict with China where possible.¹⁹

That was easier said than done. Secretary Acheson observed that recent events were impelling everything and everyone in Korea closer to a general, wider war. To start with, Chinese communists had always been involved in Korea, but their commitment had now grown into a full offensive into North Korea. Acheson also reminded the council that the USSR was behind every

¹⁸ Memorandum of Conversation Regarding National Security Council Meeting, November 28, 1950; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL; Minutes of the National Security Council Meeting with Harry S. Truman, November 28, 1950; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

¹⁹ Memorandum of Conversation Regarding National Security Council Meeting, November 28, 1950; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL. Minutes of the National Security Council Meeting with Harry S. Truman, November 28, 1950; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

communist move so the U.S. should not think of Korea in isolation but as part of the global Cold War against the Soviet Union.²⁰

Furthermore, while Acheson wanted to terminate the war, he did not feel that the U.S. could end it victoriously at acceptable cost, and a war at acceptable cost could not end victoriously. In other words, the United States could not afford the casualties of a wider, total war against China, but it could not win a war limited to Korean peninsula. The secretary believed that the U.S. could not defeat China in Korea because Peiping could supply more troops than Washington. But while the U.S. could not achieve victory in Korea, Acheson likewise counseled against trying to win in China by expanding the war into Manchuria. If air strikes across the river were necessary to save American troops, the U.S. should not hesitate to attack, but Acheson recognized that once the U.S. entered Manchuria, it would be difficult to stop, and the conflict could easily expand into a total war in Asia since the U.S. could not terminate anything by attacking Manchuria alone. Moreover, if the U.S. succeeded even temporarily in Manchuria, the USSR would “cheerfully” step in to help China, regardless of whether it led to war with the United States. And the more soldiers the U.S. sent to Korea or China, the more the Soviets would send, and the Far East would turn into a “bottomless pit” that would not get the U.S. anywhere and would just bleed the country dry. In sum, Acheson did not know how to terminate the war, but he argued that the first task was to find one place where the U.S. could hold the line and make a stand. That would show China and U.S. allies that the U.S. had no aggressive intentions and, hopefully, keep the war limited. The “great objective,” he stated,

²⁰ Memorandum of Conversation Regarding National Security Council Meeting, November 28, 1950; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL. Minutes of the National Security Council Meeting with Harry S. Truman, November 28, 1950; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

was to hold the line, end the fighting, and turn over some territory to the ROK and then get out so that the U.S. could get back to building up its own strength and the strength of Europe.²¹

Other members of the council raised similar concerns about the costs of a protracted war – a wider one against China or a limited war in Korea. Vice President Alben Barkley, for example, acknowledged the recommendation to not fight China, but noted that China might pour more troops into Korea which would threaten UN objectives and force the U.S. to retreat unless the U.S. and UN could send more troops themselves. Similarly, Stuart Symington, the former Secretary of the Air Force, who now served as Chairman of the National Security Resources Board, reiterated that the U.S. was the last force in the world that could effectively oppose communism and, rather than getting bogged down in a Korean quagmire, he argued that the best thing for the U.S. to do was to leave Korea as soon as possible. Without its soldiers stuck in Korea, the U.S. could better confront communist aggression and threats around the world. Marshall concurred that the U.S. should avoid getting stuck or “sewed up” in Korea, but he also did not know how the U.S. could withdraw honorably. Acheson thought withdrawal would be disastrous at this point. Meanwhile, President Truman likewise noted that the U.S. might have to hold the line in Korea for a long time, which could cost many lives, but the U.S. also could not afford to lose face by withdrawing too quickly. In any event though, Admiral Sherman argued that the U.S. had to move forward or back. He appreciated the risks of a general war through Manchuria, but he contended that if the Chinese launched air attacks from Manchuria, the U.S. needed to either hit back or move – U.S. forces could not stay where they were. Truman agreed.²²

²¹ Memorandum of Conversation Regarding National Security Council Meeting, November 28, 1950; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL. Minutes of the National Security Council Meeting with Harry S. Truman, November 28, 1950; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

²² Memorandum of Conversation Regarding National Security Council Meeting, November 28, 1950; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL. Minutes of the National Security Council Meeting with Harry S. Truman, November 28, 1950; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

A consensus on withdrawal began to emerge several days later when the National Security Council met again on December 1. The Joint Chiefs seemed to agree that the U.S. should withdraw to a stronger defensive position where it could hold the line against the Chinese offensive. General Collins and Admiral Sherman proposed falling back to the peninsula's waist since there was no natural line to hold at the 38th Parallel and they agreed with General Bradley that a ceasefire around the parallel was probably the best the U.S. could get in Korea although Marshall thought a ceasefire would signify American weakness.²³

Acheson's private notes showed that he was firmly committed to limited war. His list of U.S. objectives included four primary goals: one, to resist communist aggression; two, to localize the conflict and avoid a general war with China and the Soviet Union; three, to end the Korean War quickly on a satisfactory basis with the UN and to disengage American forces as swiftly as possible; and four, to "maintain a solid front" with its allies and "if possible... an overwhelming majority of the UN." Acheson aimed for all four objectives but, in the face of China's attacks, he suggested finding a place to hold the line in Korea and stabilizing the conflict through a ceasefire which could then lead to a political settlement. The secretary noted, however, that the U.S. might have to choose between a forced withdrawal (defeat) or attacks against China which would run the risk of a general war. Acheson wondered, however, if the administration was too apprehensive about provoking China. Wasn't China already in a full-scale war against UN forces in Korea? he asked. What would a total or unlimited war against China look like?²⁴

Out loud, however, Acheson speculated about a mutual withdrawal – if the U.S. retired from Korea entirely, would China withdraw to Manchuria and leave the Koreans to fight among

²³ Memorandum of Conversation, December 1, 1950; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

²⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, December 1, 1950; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

themselves? Even if China did not withdraw, General Walter Bedell Smith thought the U.S. should. The former ambassador to the Soviet Union who now directed the CIA, argued that the U.S. should get out of Korea even though he admitted withdrawal would not resolve the situation. Staying to fight was simply too costly, though. The Soviets knew that the U.S. did not want a general war in Asia and so they were willing to push and bleed the Americans while defeating U.S. armament efforts in Europe. Others assented and Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Lovett pointed out that the council largely acceded that Korea was not a decisive strategic area for the United States. Of course, MacArthur and Acheson had made exactly this point before the war and left Korea out of the United States' defensive responsibilities. But the NSC reached the same judgment in December 1950 not because of their assessment of Korea's intrinsic strategic value, but because of the costs that the U.S. was exacting and enduring in combat. The council concluded that defending Korea was not worth the price the U.S. was currently paying. If the U.S. could not defend its interests or defend them at acceptable cost, the Truman administration would rather risk losing Japan than Western Europe. The NSC therefore concurred that the U.S. should regroup its forces in Korea, stall for time, and then sign a ceasefire or truce.²⁵

Once again, the discussion raised the dilemma of bombing Manchuria. General Bradley asked if the U.S. wanted to hit back if Chinese air forces attacked UN forces and Air Force General Nathan Twining thought that if the Chinese bombed Korean ports, the U.S. would have to bomb Chinese airfields. Acheson again noted that bombing Manchuria would bring in Russian air support "and we would go from the frying pan into the fire." If the Russians supported the Chinese, Bradley and Smith thought the U.S. would have to evacuate Korea and would probably have a general war on its hands and, at that point, General Collins argued that the U.S. would have to consider the

²⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, December 1, 1950; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

atomic bomb. “The only chance then left to save us is the use or the threat of the use of the A-Bomb,” he stated. Admiral Sherman thought Peiping was likely scared of nuclear attacks and might hold back because of it but Collins concluded that the U.S. should not bomb China, even if it meant that U.S. ground forces suffered air attacks. Korea just wasn’t worth the price of a total or nuclear war.²⁶

President’s Meeting

Two days later, as UN forces continued to give way before the Chinese onslaught, President Truman met with Dean Acheson, George Marshall, and Omar Bradley on December 3 to talk about U.S. options. Marshall explained the dilemma: the U.S. had to figure out how to save American soldiers and protect its national honor at the same time. He admitted though, that the military situation was grim – Bradley estimated that it would reach a “crash state” in forty-eight to seventy-two hours. Acheson even thought Truman should declare a national emergency to help the public understand the seriousness of the situation. The U.S. needed to evacuate its troops, the advisors agreed, but Marshall confessed that the U.S. could not abandon South Korea in good conscience. He also worried that if the U.S. tried to evacuate its forces like the British and French had at Dunkirk in World War II, Chinese air forces would bomb and strafe U.S. soldiers. Truman asked about conducting operations beyond the Korean frontier and Acheson argued that those decisions should be based solely on whether it would help or hurt U.S. troops – that was the definition of an effective or beneficial operation. The U.S. also needed strong military judgment to determine whether knocking out Chinese airfields would bring the Soviets into the war and Acheson did not want to leave that judgment and decision to General MacArthur. Acheson was also committed to

²⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, December 1, 1950; SOSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

limited war so he argued that the U.S. should not attack China in order to hold Korea or simply to retaliate against the Chinese, but only to permit the evacuation of U.S. troops.²⁷

Truman-Attlee Meetings

Even as the UN military situation fell apart and U.S. strategists talked about withdrawing to the Korean waist or evacuating the peninsula, many still spoke publicly about finding a way to salvage their position or even win the war. President Truman even mentioned using the atomic bomb. Fearful that the United States might escalate or expand or nuclearize the war (and unilaterally), the British government tried to play peacemaker – like a deputy keeping the sheriff from walking to the shootout at high noon. The House of Commons had been alarmed by Truman’s suggestion of using the bomb and one hundred Labour MPs signed a letter protesting the President’s remarks. Dozens more cheered when Prime Minister Clement Attlee, like Neville Chamberlain on his way to Munich, announced that he was going to Washington to coax the American cowboys away from the nuclear brink.²⁸

Truman and Attlee met six times between December 4 and 8 and Attlee claimed that the U.S. had no choice but to negotiate with Peiping who would almost certainly demand Formosa, a seat at the UN, and diplomatic recognition. Truman and Acheson refused to capitulate, however. The President stated that the U.S. was “not prepared to proceed on this line” and the secretary insisted that the U.S. could not afford to surrender. The British also seemed to distinguish between little aggression and big aggression by encouraging the U.S. to negotiate with the communist aggressors, they seemed to promote appeasement which Acheson rejected. “Americans demand that

²⁷ Lucius D. Battle, Notes on Meeting, December 3, 1950; Philip C. Jessup, Supplemental Memo, December 3, 1950; Massive Chinese Communist Intervention and Allied Reactions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL; Memorandum of Conversation, December 3, 1950; SOSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

²⁸ Julius C. Holmes to Dean Acheson, December 1, 1950; Reactions to President's Statement re Possible use of Atomic Bomb, Box 8, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

we must be vigorous everywhere,” he averred. He also pointed out that if the U.S. surrendered, the communists would dominate the Far East and without the United States, Russia and China would become the most powerful players there and Asians would rush to make the best political and economic deals they could get with them. In contrast, British Ambassador Oliver Franks observed that the U.S. was basing its position on moral principles but, since the situation had changed and American power had collapsed, the U.S. would have to change its moral principles.²⁹ Later that week, Acheson told U.S. diplomats and consuls that the U.S. would accept a ceasefire if China agreed to it but not at the price of “political strings or other dishonorable conditions.” Once a ceasefire was agreed upon, the U.S. and China could discuss a political settlement to the Korean question.³⁰

In their meetings, the Prime Minister also worked hard to convince the President that the Korean problem required not only a military termination but a political settlement, and that the decision to use the atomic bomb could only be made after a full consultation with the states fighting in Korea. After their final conference, the two leaders issued a joint statement that blandly reaffirmed Anglo-American unity. “The objectives of our two nations in foreign policy are the same,” the statement declared: “to maintain world peace and respect for the rights and interests of all peoples, to promote strength and confidence among the freedom-loving countries of the world, to eliminate the causes of fear, want and discontent, and to advance the democratic way of life.” The President and the Prime Minister also agreed that “there can be no thought of appeasement or of rewarding aggression” in Korea. Lasting peace could only be established by resisting aggression and, while they still disagreed about which Chinese government should be represented in the UN, they

²⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, December 5, 1950; SOSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

³⁰ Dean Acheson to U.S. Diplomatic and Consular Offices, December 9, 1950; U.S. Effort to Obtain UN Action re Chinese Intervention, Box 8, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

concluded that communist aggression threatened the independence and security of Asia, and both pledged to help Asian nations resist communism. The United States and Great Britain determined, therefore, to increase their military capabilities, their support and defense of the free world, and Truman hoped that “world conditions would never call for the use of the atomic bomb.”³¹

Localizing the War

For the Truman administration, however, the most important principle in Korea was to localize the war. Even though they were uncertain about China’s intentions, U.S. strategists wanted to make sure that Peiping did not have any doubts or insecurities about American intentions, and they remained determined, above all else, to localize the conflict without prejudicing military necessity in Korea. U.S. officials in the State and Defense Departments tried to present a unified agenda and make it clear in Washington, the UN, and Korea that the U.S. was fighting against North Korea and did not want a wider war with China or the Soviet Union. Truman likewise told Congressional leaders on December 1 that he and everyone else in his administration was doing everything they could to keep the conflict from spreading.³²

Even before China began its offensive in October, Undersecretary of State James Webb told Loy W. Henderson, the U.S. Ambassador to India, to make it clear that the “US has no repeat no desire whatsoever that hostilities develop” between UN and Chinese forces and reminded that the conflict would be a tragedy for the world but especially for China. Webb insisted that UN operations posed “no threat whatsoever to Korea’s neighbors” and that the U.S. had “no desire to extend [the] conflict or to establish bases in Korea.” The UN’s mission, he reiterated, was to repel aggression and establish peace and security so that Koreans could determine their own destiny. Webb also warned

³¹ Communique, December 8, 1950; Official File, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL; Julius C. Holmes to Dean Acheson, December 1, 1950; Reactions to President’s Statement re Possible use of Atomic Bomb, Box 8, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³² Minutes of Meeting with Congressional Leaders, December 1, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

that Chinese military intervention against the UN would be a hostile act contrary to world opinion, and unjustifiable by any standards of international law or practice.³³

China invaded North Korea despite the warnings and the Chinese offensive left the Truman administration deeply concerned. Acheson worried that China might precipitate an even worse crisis that could lead to world war: "It would be a tragedy of the most colossal nature," he announced.³⁴ After China attacked UN forces in North Korea, therefore, the Truman administration redoubled its efforts to localize the conflict as much as possible and assure China that the U.S. and the UN had no intention of widening the war. In November 1950, the UN drafted a resolution prohibiting military actions that might spread the conflict and the State Department even added a statement clarifying that if China withdrew its forces and refrained from intervening against UN forces, the UN would hold China's frontier with Korea inviolate and ensure that China's legitimate interests would be protected.³⁵ When the UN Security Council met on November 8, Warren Austin declared definitively that the U.S. and the UN did not want war with China or the USSR, but that China, not the United States was instigating a wider conflict. "The people of the world do not want a general war," he proclaimed. "Probably there is no emotion that stirs their hearts more deeply than this overwhelming desire to avoid an extension of the fighting outside of Korea. But the present facts which are before the Council could be interpreted as a provocation to general war."³⁶ As the council discussed MacArthur's special report on the Chinese intervention, however, Austin stated, "The point of the spear is in Korea but the hands which hold the shaft are in Manchuria. The point of the

³³ James E. Webb to Loy W. Henderson, October 4, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³⁴ State Department Press Release 1157, November 15, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³⁵ H. Freeman Matthews to James N. Burns, November 6, 1950; Dean Acheson to Warren Austin, November 7, 1950; United Nations Resolution S/1894, November 10, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³⁶ United Nations S/PV. 520, November 8, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

spear must be withdrawn.”³⁷ The UN, therefore, called for the withdrawal of Chinese troops while reassuring Peiping that the UN did not have aggressive intentions.³⁸

Two days later, Acheson instructed Warren to show that the U.S. had “no hidden purposes of our own” and that the U.S. would take advantage of any opportunity to obtain a UN settlement or prevent general war over Korea. At the same time, although Acheson thought it would be easy to brand the Chinese as aggressors at the UN, he told Warren that “Our overall national interest does not permit us to move readily down this path. We must be careful that our political posture not run substantially ahead of the situation on the ground in such a way as to commit us to heavy involvements in Asia which we should try to avoid.” U.S. political and military decisions, Acheson concluded, should be focused on the “fundamental and overriding” conflict with international communism, not merely the current conflict in Korea.³⁹

Thus, even though the U.S. was not sure what had impelled China’s intervention, U.S. strategists were determined not to aggravate the situation by escalating or expanding the war. As Acheson told British Foreign Secretary Bevin, “we should do nothing provocative.” The United States and Great Britain should simply present the facts to the UN and avoid “pressing and proving a case of aggression against China” that would lead to full UN sanctions. Acheson also thought they should continue to officially ignore Soviet arms and advisors in Korea in order to give the communists a way to save face and back out. Moscow and Peiping would then appreciate that the

³⁷ Warren Austin to Dean Acheson, November 14, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³⁸ Warren Austin to Dean Acheson, November 14, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³⁹ Dean Acheson to Warren Austin, November 10, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

U.S. and its allies were making every effort to demonstrate that they were trying to limit the fighting in Korea.⁴⁰

American allies wanted to limit the war as well. Ernest Bevin wanted the UN to find a solution to the Korean problem that would not result in hostilities dragging on with “the ever growing risk of extension beyond Korea.”⁴¹ Likewise, the French worried about the consequences of spreading the war in the Far East and advised caution in condemning Chinese aggression or extending military operations to Chinese territory and airspace.⁴²

At the UN, the U.S. tried again to procure an arrangement that would decrease international tensions. In another proposed resolution, the U.S. tried to recognize that the military campaign was over with the destruction of the Korean People’s Army and proposed the establishment of a temporary demilitarized zone from which all forces could be withdrawn. Acheson hoped that the proposed resolution would allow the U.S. to terminate its military campaign and cut its losses while reassuring China that the UN had no aggressive intent against Manchuria.⁴³

By the end of November, however, there seemed little chance of localizing hostilities. China’s offensive wore down and drove back UN forces and Chinese intentions appeared much more expansive than simply securing the Chinese frontier, protecting hydro-electric installations, or providing token assistance to North Korean forces. The JCS and field commanders in Korea agreed that the Chinese offensive was “planned and staged over considerable period of time” and Acheson

⁴⁰ Dean Acheson to Ernest Bevin, November 13, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁴¹ Dean Acheson to Warren Austin, November 16, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁴² Warren Austin to Dean Acheson, November 29, 1950; Allied Criticisms of the UN Commander, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁴³ Dean Acheson to Warren Austin, November 16, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

asserted that China was not merely responding to the UN offensive and clearly intended to destroy UN forces in Korea. The scale of China's offensive "makes it impossible to pretend that this is not openly aggressive move by Peiping regime," the secretary told U.S. ambassadors.⁴⁴ Several weeks later, as Chinese forces pushed UN troops back toward the 38th Parallel, Acheson received reports that China was planning to escalate the war further. The U.S. embassy in Hong Kong claimed that Chinese politburo members had met in Moscow at the end of October and decided to take advantage of the differences between Western powers, U.S. internal political disagreements, and the lack of UN reinforcements in Korea and propel their offensive to surround and annihilate UN forces and conquer all of Korea. They also decided to send reinforcements to the Viet Minh in their ongoing war against the French in Indochina, and attack Formosa in the first half of 1951.⁴⁵ While communist aggression seemed to be multiplying, though, the American purpose in Korea remained the same: "to resist aggression, to localize hostilities, and to wind up Korean problem on satisfactory UN basis and so as not to commit large US forces indefinitely." The growing conflict with China and additional international threats seemed to reinforce the importance of localizing and limiting the Korean War.⁴⁶

Consequently, while they focused on localizing the war with China, U.S. strategists wanted to ensure that the Soviet Union did not enter the war and make everything worse. The U.S. ambassador to the Kremlin, Alan Kirk, admitted in a conversation with Truman that the situation with the USSR was "ticklish" and thought that certain events might cause the Soviets to make a move against the West. Certainly, a declaration of war against China and the bombing of Chinese

⁴⁴ Dean Acheson to U.S. Diplomatic Missions, November 28, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁴⁵ Walter McConaughy to Dean Acheson, December 24, 1950; Massive Chinese Communist Intervention and Allied Reactions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁴⁶ Dean Acheson to U.S. Diplomatic Missions, November 28, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

cities would cause the Soviets to intervene in Korea. But Kirk also suggested that the USSR might attack the West if U.S. forces were eliminated in Korea. Between those possibilities – attacks on China and the defeat of American forces – Kirk maintained that “the Soviets were gaining so much by bleeding the United States, in particular, and the Western world in general, through the war in Korea, that it would not be to their immediate advantage to move against us.” The President agreed. Kirk concluded that “the only way to deal with the Soviets was to be strong, to be firm and to be consistent.” In strength, the U.S. “did not need to match them man for man, gun for gun, and tank for tank, but... we must be so strong as to make the Soviets pause and give careful consideration to the risk that they would run in engaging in a general war with the Western world.” Kirk admitted that “Stalin was wise and canny” but “he would not start a war he could not win.” Still, like Hitler, maybe he could “be persuaded to seek world domination while still alive.” Kirk gave the odds of a war started by the USSR as 3:2 against.⁴⁷

Despite the uncertainty about Chinese and Soviet intentions, the Truman administration determined to limit and localize the war in order to avoid escalating and expanding the conflict. Keeping the war contained and avoiding a world war or nuclear war was more important than victory over communism.

⁴⁷ Alan Kirk, Memo of Conversation, December 19, 1950; Massive Chinese Communist Intervention and Allied Reactions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

Limited and Unlimited War

The Korean war was limited by external constraints such as terrain, logistics, the enemy, and public opinion, but most limits were deliberately self-imposed by U.S. strategists.¹ On the ground and at sea, the U.S. refused to expand and escalate the war by rejecting the use of forces from Formosa, prohibiting operations beyond Korea's borders, abandoning large-scale operations, and limiting the number of soldiers in Korea. In the air, the U.S. refused to use nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons because they were disproportionate to a limited war and impractical considering the Korean terrain and international, allied, and enemy reactions. The Air Force was also forbidden to pursue or attack targets in Manchuria, and restricted from bombing targets along the Yalu River. Despite the temptations to un-limit the war, the United States remained committed to limited operations and localized war because escalating and expanding the war would have led to a world war with nuclear weapons which would have been impossible to win at a moral price.

Outside Korea, the U.S. rejected operations or help that could enlarge the war. While the Truman administration worked tirelessly to maintain allied support and the UN coalition in Korea, it rejected help from Chiang Kai-Shek and the Chinese nationalists in Formosa. MacArthur pleaded incessantly for the U.S. to enlist Formosa's troops, but the State Department, Great Britain, and other allies thought it would bring China into the war or provoke Peiping to commit more of its 4.5 million soldiers. The JCS were also skeptical of the abilities of nationalist soldiers and worried that their involvement would drain U.S. logistics. The U.S. also continued to prohibit operations beyond Korea's borders to show Peiping and Moscow that the U.S. wanted to avoid a wider or world war that could trigger a nuclear holocaust. At sea, the U.S. limited its operations as well. MacArthur

¹ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 232.

wanted to expand U.S. naval operations to bombard and blockade the Chinese coast, but Washington and its allies felt that Peiping would interpret those actions as deliberate attempts to enlarge the war with China and they rejected his proposals.

Inside Korea, the United States also severely curtailed its ground war against communist forces. On November 27, 1951, the two sides agreed to make the military demarcation line the line of contact and both armies withdrew two miles to create demilitarized zones between them. Thereafter, the U.S. generally limited its combat operations to small-level units, hoping that they could limit the war's costs and hasten a ceasefire by abandoning large-scale operations. The U.S. also refused to escalate the war and stopped reinforcing its troops. By limiting the number of ground forces, the U.S. was able to preserve its global response options and offer more security to its European allies while showing the communist powers that the U.S. did not want to enlarge the Korean War and that its top priority was the containment of Soviet expansion in Europe.²

The U.S. likewise imposed handicaps on its air operations. Most obviously, U.S. strategists refused to use biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons. At times, the U.S. considered using unconventional weapons, especially in the event that negotiations might break down permanently, but nuclear weapons like the atomic bomb and thermonuclear weapons like the new hydrogen bomb represented total war and total commitment and U.S. strategists refused to use them because they were immoral and disproportionate to the limited war in Korea. The Air Force also faced logistical challenges that made nuclear weapons unfeasible in Korea. Some strategists questioned whether nuclear weapons could be decisive on the rugged Korean terrain, or against China, while unsuitable targets, international outrage, and the threat of Soviet counterstrikes made nuclear

² James and Wells, 232–36.

weapons a last-resort option. Peiping and Moscow did accuse the UN of using poison gas and germ attacks, but their accusations were just propaganda stunts.³

The U.S. also prohibited the bombing of Manchuria. Many Americans presumed that the United States could easily and decisively win the war if the Air Force would un-limit its operations in China, but the administration noted that bombing could backfire. To begin with, bombing only the rail lines in North Korea made more sense. Manchuria had a more extensive rail network which meant bombing Chinese rail lines would be more difficult than attacking the lines in North Korea. Moreover, because of the differences in rail networks, Chinese armies and supplies hit a bottleneck when they entered the Korean peninsula and that was where UN aircraft hit them.⁴

From a military perspective, bombing Chinese production centers also would not seriously damage China's war potential since very little arms and equipment were actually produced in China. To cut off production, the UN would have to bomb many Chinese cities and "Militarily, the game would hardly be worth the candle." Bombing China would also be ineffective politically. The administration observed that the communist government had been imposed by force and the Chinese people accepted communism because it was better than continuing the civil war. But now public opinion had begun to wane. Consequently, Peiping had been trying to shore up domestic support through anti-foreign sentiment that played on Chinese fears of Western aggression. Bombing Chinese cities would therefore confirm Peiping's propaganda. "Politically, therefore, bombing might strengthen rather than weaken the communist regime."⁵

³ Communist Charges of Bacteriological and Chemical Warfare, Box 10, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL; James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 236-238.

⁴ Korean Facts, undated; Korea-MacArthur-Foreign Policy, Box 64, Subject File, 1916-1995, GMEP, HSTPL.

⁵ Korean Facts, undated; Korea-MacArthur-Foreign Policy, Box 64, Subject File, 1916-1995, GMEP, HSTPL.

The U.S. also limited air attacks on targets along the Yalu River that were sensitive to the Chinese and Soviets like cities, bridges, dams, and hydro-electric facilities. The State Department, for instance, initially protested against attacks on North Korean cities at the border like Sinuiju and Rashin but both restrictions were later removed. But while the JCS approved attacks on the Korean sides of the Yalu, they forbid the Air Force from bombing the Chinese ends of the bridges which frustrated Army and Air Force commanders since communist troops could repair the bridges quickly and easily or even walk across the river into Korea when the Yalu froze over.⁶

U.S. strategists did not think an extension of the air war would necessarily lead to World War III but, it would be extremely dangerous because large-scale Chinese air attacks would require Russian pilots, Russian ground crews, and probably Russian bases. The administration continued to affirm that “We will not hesitate to bomb air bases in China and in Russia too, if that is necessary to save the United Nations forces in Korea,” but they saw no reason to risk retaliation by attacking Chinese bases first.⁷ Keeping the air war limited, therefore, was calculated to limit the geography and costs of the Korean War.

HOT PURSUIT

While U.S. officials were doing everything in their power on the diplomatic front to localize and limit the Korean War, they kept running afoul of military necessity on the battlefield where Chinese aircraft attacked UN forces in Korea and then retreated to the safety of their air bases in Manchuria which were immune from UN attack. MacArthur and the UN Command complained that China’s air attacks were unfair and demoralizing since UN pilots could not defend themselves and they pressured the Joint Chiefs of Staff to remove the prohibitions against pursuing enemy

⁶ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 239–40.

⁷ Korean Facts, undated; Korea-MacArthur-Foreign Policy, Box 64, Subject File, 1916-1995, GMEP, HSTPL.

aircraft across the Yalu River and striking air bases in Manchuria. The JCS considered the “hot pursuit” of Chinese planes into Manchuria but the State Department worried that attacks in Chinese airspace would escalate and expand the war, provoke further Chinese or Soviet intervention, and possibly lead to another world war. U.S. allies also rejected hot pursuit because of its international risks and the JCS ultimately refused to allow it because they remained committed to limited war.

In order to restrict the battlefield to the Korean peninsula and avoid escalating and expanding the war into China, the JCS had strictly prohibited U.S. aircraft from flying into Manchurian airspace. Once again though, the limited air war would not stay limited. While American aircraft were not allowed into Manchuria, Soviet-built MiG-15 fighters in the Chinese Air Force used Chinese territory as a “privileged sanctuary.” Chinese ground forces could move into Korea and supply themselves from bases and lines of communication that were sheltered by Manchuria’s immunity to attack while enemy aircraft operated from Manchurian airfields, dashed into Korean air space to attack UN forces and then flew back to safety behind the Manchurian border. MacArthur, meanwhile, had the strictest orders about violating Manchurian territory and was instructed to use “extreme care” in operations near the frontier to ensure that hostilities were confined to Korea and prevent the U.S. from instigating a wider war. U.S. officials even offered compensation to China for any damages caused in accidentally attacking Chinese territory.⁸

To UN Command and especially the Air Force, Chinese air attacks were frustrating, unfair, and deeply demoralizing. While China could attack UN forces with impunity, UN forces were restricted from even flying into Chinese airspace. Pilots in the Far East Air Forces (FEAF) felt infuriated that they could not even defend themselves fully from attack and felt like they were being

⁸ Dean Acheson to U.S. Diplomatic Missions, November 13, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

punished for trying to localize hostilities and following the rules. Acheson complained, “This determination to play according to the rules imposes most serious handicap in face of an enemy which is willing not only to break the rules themselves but to exploit proper conduct [of] UN forces.” The secretary worried that Chinese attacks would eventually become so costly that UN forces would have to retaliate against Chinese territory. He explained, “the abuse of Manchuria by the enemy could easily impose an intolerable burden upon UN forces operating lawfully and properly on UN missions in Korea.”⁹

As a result, even though U.S. strategists wanted to localize the conflict in Korea, they began to argue that UN pilots should be authorized to fly into Manchurian airspace in “hot pursuit” of enemy aircraft that had flown into Korea to attack UN forces. Dean Rusk reported that the Pentagon did not think the U.S. should take action against Manchuria “but they feel very strongly that the whole world should understand the great problem created by forces which are in position to attack UN forces from within a safe haven.” Accordingly, the State Department reached out to allied governments and explained that it might become necessary to permit UN aircraft to defend themselves in the airspace over the Yalu River and to permit the pursuit of enemy aircraft “up to two or three minutes flying time into Manchurian air space.” The U.S. assured its allies, however, that UN aircraft would limit themselves to repelling enemy aircraft engaged in offensive missions into Korea.¹⁰

U.S. strategists justified hot pursuit by claiming that it was still limited. It was a “minimum reaction” to provocations, and they contended that it would not affect the enemy’s attitude toward

⁹ Dean Acheson to U.S. Diplomatic Missions, November 13, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

¹⁰ Dean Rusk to Dean Acheson, November 7, 1950; Dean Acheson to U.S. Diplomatic Missions, November 13, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL; Air Counter-Action Against Manchuria, April 3, 1951; Allied Views re Reconnaissance and Possible Retaliatory Bombing Outside Korea, Box 10, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

Korean operations. The CIA had reported, for example, that hot pursuit, or even attacks on airfields or troops north of the Yalu “would not increase the already substantial risk that the situation may degenerate into a general war involving Russia.” In short, the Kremlin would not likely choose to go to war because of local provocations, although the CIA did think that such provocations would probably increase the extent of China’s reaction in Korea.¹¹ But FEAF pilots would only be allowed to fly up to eight miles into Chinese airspace and, by flying into China, hot pursuit would warn Peiping that the UN would not allow them to exploit Manchuria’s immunity and thereby increase the morale of UN pilots “who are now prevented from taking minimum defense measures.”¹²

In practice, hot pursuit made sense to the Air Force and its pilots, but the policy escalated and expanded the war. The optics were bad, for one, since hot pursuit meant that the UN was now attacking China and instead of the UN fighting a war *with* China, the UN would now be fighting *in* China. Hot pursuit also felt like a slippery slope. What was the difference, after all, between flying two or three minutes into Manchuria, and flying up to five or maybe ten minutes into Manchuria? Once UN pilots were no longer fighting in the vicinity of the Yalu River, where did their commanders draw the line? What would stop UN aircraft from flying further afield? Moreover, attacking enemy aircraft over Manchuria was just one step removed from attacking enemy aircraft in Manchuria, on the ground. And if UN planes could attack Chinese planes in Manchuria, why couldn’t they strafe or bomb Chinese airfields? It certainly would make more sense to destroy Chinese planes before they took off and attacked UN forces in Korea. After that, if the UN could attack military targets on the ground like airfields, what would stop them from bombing other military targets like army bases, radar installations, or munitions factories? At that point, if the UN

¹¹ Report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Central Intelligence Agency, November 9, 1950; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

¹² Dean Acheson to U.S. Diplomatic Missions, November 13, 1950; *The Question of Hot Pursuit*, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

could attack Chinese infrastructure and industries, there would not be much difference between bombing isolated military targets and urban ones. It did not take a long strategic leap to bomb Chinese cities once military targets in China were fair game as America's experience in World War II showed. Furthermore, if the UN was fighting in China and bombing Chinese targets, it would not take much to involve UN ground forces as well. In short, hot pursuit seemed seductively innocent and justified in retaliation or self-defense but the policy risked escalating and expanding the war and many observers opposed it because they could feel the gravitational pull of the slippery slope.

Allied Reactions

American allies, for example, opposed hot pursuit because they argued that chasing Chinese planes into Manchuria was too risky and the UN had to draw the line somewhere. Great Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, France, and Australia all reacted unfavorably when U.S. ambassadors explained what the White House and Pentagon were thinking. Even though they had supported the U.S. position in Korea, the Western allies considered dissociating themselves from hot pursuit if the decision was unilateral and without UN endorsement.¹³

Recognizing that China's intervention created a new situation and that Chinese objectives were unclear and may or may not be limited, the Australian government advised the U.S. to take caution and counseled against hot pursuit. Respecting the Manchurian border would be difficult but Australian officials worried that hot pursuit could lead to the bombing of Manchurian targets. The consequences of violating the border, therefore, "could be so grave that it may be best [to] temporarily ignore provocation to extent possible," they told U.S. Ambassador Pete Jarman.¹⁴

¹³ Dean Acheson to George C. Marshall, November 27, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

¹⁴ Pete Jarman to Dean Acheson, November 11, 1950; Warren Austin to Dean Acheson, November 14, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

Nevertheless, while acknowledging that the situation could not continue indefinitely, Australia still wanted to avoid precipitating world war and officials suggested that the UN issue a declaration citing the facts of the Manchuria problem. The declaration could deplore the breaches in international law and assume Peiping was aware of the need to prevent further breaches. The declaration could also point out that UN forces were suffering heavy provocations but had acted with great restraint to their own military disadvantage, although it was unreasonable to continue the restraint indefinitely. It could further state that if China was unwilling or unable to stop the misuse of Manchuria, UN forces might be compelled to engage in limited hot pursuit in self-defense. The declaration could stress, however, that the Security Council wanted to limit the conflict and respect the integrity of the Manchurian border and hoped that China would take immediate action to ensure the integrity of the border from its side. By issuing a declaration (instead of a resolution) the UN would not have to imply diplomatic recognition of the Chinese communist regime and it would avoid the risk of a possible veto and the appearance of an ultimatum. If the UN warning was ignored and China continued its attacks so that hot pursuit became unavoidable, “it would be clear all peaceful efforts had been exhausted.”¹⁵ In short, Australia wanted to make every peaceful effort to resolve the crisis before resorting to hot pursuit.

The Netherlands likewise had no doubts about the provocations and no quarrel with the legal propriety of hot pursuit, “but wondered frankly whether [it] would not lead [to] all-out war [in the] Far East.” Certainly, dogfights over Manchuria could only exacerbate the relations between China and the UN. As Dutch officials pointed out, Peiping already feared that the UN intervention in Korea was merely a pretext for the U.S. to establish a permanent military base in Korea from which to attack China, and hot pursuit in Manchuria would merely confirm their anxieties. Certainly,

¹⁵ Pete Jarman to Dean Acheson, November 17, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

China would interpret U.S. actions as aggressive, especially after the U.S. had claimed its attacks would be limited to South Korea, and then to North Korea. The Dutch Foreign Minister, Dirk Stikker, also considered hot pursuit beyond the scope of authority for the UN commander and argued that it should not be undertaken without the express approval of the Security Council or General Assembly. The Dutch were also concerned that if the war with China escalated, UN forces could become pinned down in Korea when they were really needed in Europe.¹⁶ The Dutch thus voiced a host of legal, diplomatic, and moral misgivings about hot pursuit.

Canada similarly acknowledged the problem in Manchuria and admitted that it could become intolerable for UN forces but questioned “whether the burden has not become, or is likely shortly to become, so intolerable as to make it necessary for UN aircraft to pursue attacking enemy aircraft up to two or three minutes flying time into Manchurian air space.” In short, Canadian officials wanted the U.S. to balance the military requirement of defending UN forces against the political and moral considerations that hot pursuit could expand the conflict. To avoid extending hostilities and to give China a chance to discontinue their abuse of Manchurian air space, Canadian officials proposed that China be given a “specific public warning... that, if hostile aircraft continue to use Manchurian air space, United Nations aircraft will naturally have to defend themselves in the air space over the Yalu River to the extent of pursuing attacking enemy aircraft.” Officials thought the warning might help determine China’s real intentions and give them an opportunity to limit the conflict on their end. Canada did not doubt the legal right to hot pursuit under international law, but argued that no military operations should take place outside of Korea without UN specific authorization.¹⁷

¹⁶ Vinton Chapin to Dean Acheson, November 14, 1950; Vinton Chapin to Dean Acheson, November 18, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

¹⁷ Stanley Woodward to Dean Acheson, November 15, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

Other allies concurred. French officials felt frustrated that the U.S. intended to make a decision without consulting the UN and, although New Zealand officials sympathized with the difficulties that UN forces faced, they felt apprehensive that hot pursuit could spread the conflict further which was precisely what the UN was trying to avoid.¹⁸ Even Great Britain, America's closest ally in Korea, rejected hot pursuit. Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin explained that Britain "cannot endorse the United States suggestion that violation of the Manchurian border may be necessary." Hot pursuit carried "great danger, for it is likely to result in the very thing which we want to avoid, namely the spreading of the conflict."¹⁹

American allies thus criticized hot pursuit on legal, diplomatic, and moral grounds and encouraged the United States to limit the war. Generally, the allies indicated that pursuing enemy planes into Manchurian airspace, however, justified, was not worth the cost since it was likely to escalate, expand, and exacerbate the war. The point was buttressed even more when the State Department learned that the Soviet Embassy in Peiping had told Panikkar, the Indian Ambassador to China, that if the UN bombed Manchuria, they would be attacked by Soviet air forces.²⁰ Attacking Manchuria, therefore, would not only expand the war into Chinese territory, but bring in the Soviet Union as well. At that point, a third world war would have been underway.

The JCS ultimately never authorized hot pursuit because of the opposition from the State Department and American allies. The prospect of chasing Chinese planes into Manchuria and possibly attacking Chinese airfields, however justified, seemed too risky. Peiping would likely see hot

¹⁸ U. Alexis Johnson, Memo of Conversation, November 16, 1950; Robert Scotten to Dean Acheson, November 22, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

¹⁹ Ernest Bevin to Oliver Franks, November 16, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

²⁰ Dean Acheson to George C. Marshall, November 16, 1950; The Question of Hot Pursuit, November 1950, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

pursuit as the first step in expanding the war into China and U.S. strategists similarly feared that an air war in Manchuria could turn into general war with China and the Soviet Union.

The issue of hot pursuit thus showed that U.S. strategists were dedicated to limiting the Korean War. The Truman administration had good reasons to escalate and expand the war into Manchuria. Hot pursuit would have been a legal method of self-defense, U.S. generals claimed it was necessary to protect their soldiers, and it would have helped UN Command to achieve its goals of defeating enemy forces in Korea. Hot pursuit was also still a limited response to Chinese attacks and some estimates claimed it would not provoke Soviet intervention. But the Truman administration ultimately rejected hot pursuit because of diplomatic and moral concerns. Despite the arguments of military necessity, U.S. strategists determined that containing the war was just as important as containing communism. They reckoned that the costs or risk of a wider war with China or the USSR outweighed the costs of China's attacks on UN forces in Korea. Although hot pursuit would have been justified on military, legal, or even moral grounds, U.S. strategists believed that their most important moral obligation was to limit the war and keep it from spreading or intensifying and so they deliberately restrained UN operations.

BOMBING MANCHURIA: THE YALU RIVER TARGETS

U.S. strategists faced a similar dilemma along the Yalu River where they debated bombing bridges to halt the march of men and materiel into Korea. MacArthur summarized the problem on November 6 and reported that "Men and material in large forces are pouring across all bridges over the Yalu from Manchuria" which threatened "the ultimate destruction of the forces under my command." Using the bridges, the Chinese were able to move their forces across the river "under the cover of darkness and the distance between the Yalu and UN lines was so short that enemy forces could be deployed without suffering interdiction by American air forces." MacArthur insisted

that the only way to stop enemy reinforcements was to destroy the bridges and he warned that “Every hour that this is postponed will be paid for dearly in American and other United Nations blood.” The general planned to attack the bridge at Sinuiju where the main enemy columns crossed from Manchuria, but he suspended his planned attack “Under the gravest protest that I can make” because of instructions from the JCS even though MacArthur insisted that the strike was necessary and legal. “What I had ordered is entirely within the scope of the rules of war and the resolutions and directions which I have read from the United Nations,” he declared, and the attack was not an act of belligerency against Chinese territory “in spite of the outrageous international lawlessness emanating therefrom.” MacArthur deplored the restrictions he faced and claimed that they “may well result in a calamity of major proportion for which I cannot accept the responsibility.” He begged for the JCS to reconsider its limitations.²¹

Like the issue of hot pursuit, the Yalu bridges signified the frustrations of limited war which felt demoralizing and unfair to U.S. commanders. When it seemed like China was fighting a largely unlimited war, many soldiers thought it was unjust for the U.S. to fight a limited one and let the Chinese cross into Korea without any opposition. Why should the United States fight a lawful war when China was fighting an unlawful war? MacArthur also pointed out that destroying the bridges was necessary and legal – the complete criteria to justify a military operation. But the general also went further and argued that destroying the bridges was moral because it would prevent additional U.S. casualties. In essence, MacArthur argued that limited war was not saving American lives but sacrificing them. The major calamity that he wanted to avoid or prevent was not a wider war with China – the U.S. was already at war with China – but the destruction of his forces and the loss of Korea and, in that regard, he felt that limited war was at cross purposes with U.S. military goals.

²¹ Douglas MacArthur to Department of the Army, November 6, 1950; NAF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

After all, if the United States was not trying to stop or defeat Chinese forces, what was it fighting for? Why were American soldiers killing and dying in Korea?

In reply to the general's report and plea, the JCS authorized MacArthur to bomb the bridge across the Yalu, from Sinuiju in Korea to Antung in Manchuria. The Chiefs agreed that the destruction of the bridge would increase the security of MacArthur's forces unless it also led to increased Chinese effort and even Soviet involvement "to what they might well construe as an attack on Manchuria." The JCS admitted that greater communist involvement "would not only endanger your forces but would enlarge the area of conflict and U.S. involvement to a most dangerous degree." But in view of the general's complaints about the men and materiel crossing the river, the JCS authorized MacArthur to bomb the Korean end of the bridge, provided that it was still "essential to [the] safety of your forces." The JCS did not authorize the bombing of any dams or power plants on the Yalu River, however, and they reiterated that it was vital to U.S. interests to "localize the fighting in Korea" and they reminded MacArthur to take "extreme care" to avoid violating Manchurian territory and airspace.²²

The Joint Chiefs clearly realized though, that they were cutting it close. They acknowledged that Peiping and Moscow might justifiably interpret the bombing as an attack on Manchuria and they must have understood that U.S. aircraft could easily miss the Korean side and hit the Chinese side of the bridge or Manchuria proper. But, successful or not, the attack on the Yalu bridge could certainly aggravate China and the USSR and invite greater communist involvement or commitment. After learning of the chiefs' decisions then, Undersecretary of Defense Robert Lovett rushed from the Pentagon to the White House to tell Dean Acheson and Dean Rusk that the Air Force had been ordered to bomb the bridge. Lovett explained that U.S. bombers would use radio-controlled bombs

²² Joint Chiefs of Staff to Douglas MacArthur, November 6, 1950; NAF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

to destroy the Korean side of the bridge, but he doubted whether the attack could interrupt bridge traffic and he worried about the risk of bombing the Manchurian side of the river. Rusk also disclosed that the U.S. had promised Great Britain that it would not take any action which might involve attacks on Manchuria without consulting British officials first and, after some discussion, Acheson, Rusk, and Lovett agreed that the bombing should be postponed. Lovett quickly phoned George Marshall who agreed that the bombing was “unwise unless there was some mass movement across the River, which threatened the security of our troops.” Acheson then phoned Truman in Kansas City, but the President sided with MacArthur. While he recognized the “great international complications” and risks which bombing could produce, he was willing to accept them and approve the bombing if it was necessary to protect UN forces and save American lives.²³ When Acheson pointed out that they did not know what was necessary, the President suggested that the secretary call MacArthur to get the facts. Lovett later explained to Rusk that the mission was being postponed and that instructions had been sent to MacArthur not to attack any targets within five miles of the Manchurian border and asking for MacArthur’s estimate of the situation and the reasons for the mission against Sinuiju and the Yalu Bridge.²⁴

However, just like hot pursuit, some American officials and allies worried that bombing the bridges or other infrastructure on the Yalu would escalate the war. At the UN, the French delegation suggested that MacArthur issue a statement assuring China that the UN would not damage, disrupt, or destroy hydro-electric facilities on the river. Other delegations agreed and some Australian

²³ Dean Acheson, Summary of Conversation, November 6, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL; Memorandum of Conference Between Dean Acheson, Robert Lovett, and Dean Rusk, November 6, 1950; SOSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

²⁴ Memorandum of Conference Between Dean Acheson, Robert Lovett, and Dean Rusk, November 6, 1950; SOSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

representatives proposed establishing a cordon sanitaire or buffer zone in Korea to limit the conflict.²⁵

Acheson soon clarified that the U.S. had no intention of bombing hydro-electric dams but felt any declaration would tie MacArthur's hands. The dam in question featured a two-way road on top which provided the principal causeway for Chinese forces to enter North Korea and Acheson conceded that the U.S. would probably have to bomb the communication lines between North Korea and Manchuria as well in order to impede the arrival of massive reinforcements from China.²⁶ The Secretary of State thus made an uncharacteristic case for military necessity. He hesitated to make a declaration about America's limited aims because he did not want to rule out the possibility that destroying the dams would be necessary and, even though the U.S. did not intend to bust dams on the Yalu, Acheson apparently meant only that the U.S. did not seek to destroy dams as an end in itself. He admitted that the U.S. might try to bomb them in order to achieve its broader strategic objectives.

The National Security Council, on the other hand, wanted to preclude military necessity. While the NSC hoped that UN forces would overcome North Korean and Chinese resistance in Korea, they recognized that – as at Sinuiju – the military situation might lead MacArthur to request permission to bomb targets in Manchuria which would set the administration's moral considerations against each other. The NSC felt that the U.S. had a responsibility to support the UN and develop the organization as the vehicle for preventing aggression and eliminating war, but the U.S. also had an obligation to avoid a war with China which would further Soviet purposes. With those considerations in mind, the NSC worried that attacks on Manchuria would lead to war with China

²⁵ Warren Austin to Dean Acheson, November 6, 1950; Efforts to Prevent Enlargement of Hostilities, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

²⁶ Douglas MacArthur II, Memo of Conversation, November 7, 1950; Allied Criticisms of the UN Commander, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

and it recommended that the U.S. take all possible actions to prevent such attacks from becoming necessary.²⁷ In other words, the NSC wanted to limit the war and give the U.S. more margin for error by staying away from the military temptations that could lead to a wider war with China.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS

U.S. strategists also wanted to limit the war by avoiding situations where the atomic bomb might become useful or necessary. While there were never any serious operational plans to employ nuclear weapons during the Korean War, the atomic bomb was never far from the minds of U.S. strategists who usually referenced it as a weapon of last resort. General Vandenberg introduced the A-Bomb when Truman first talked to the Joint Chiefs about how to respond to North Korea's invasion and, in a meeting of the National Security Council on December 1, General Collins thought the U.S. would probably have to use the bomb if attacking Manchuria led to a general war with China and the Soviet Union. The President himself announced that he was giving "active consideration" to the bomb after China's offensive in November, but Great Britain and other allies reacted so forcefully that Truman never talked publicly about using nuclear weapons again. In January 1952, though, Truman did write in his diary about issuing an ultimatum to Moscow threatening to attack Soviet cities with atomic bombs if the USSR did not compel North Korea and China to advance peace negotiations. Meanwhile, although MacArthur would later be accused of wanting to nuke China, he never recommended using nuclear weapons while he commanded UN forces. However, he did suggest their use in December 1952 in private conversations with President Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles. The former general told the president-elect that a line of radioactive waste materials could be drizzled along Korea's northern border, followed by conventional assaults on both coasts, and the atomic bombing of military targets in North Korea to

²⁷ James S. Lay, Jr., to Senior National Security Council Staff, With Attachment, November 17, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

destroy enemy forces. At that point though, MacArthur had not been in command for twenty months and Eisenhower and Dulles rejected his counsel and never sought it again. Eisenhower did try though, to intimidate China and North Korea into signing an armistice by threatening to use nuclear and thermonuclear weapons in spring 1953.²⁸

Clearly, the nuclear sword of Damocles hung over the entire length of the Korean War. But although U.S. strategists remained confident in the destructive and coercive power of the atomic bomb and considered certain circumstances when the bomb might be effective or even necessary, they consciously chose to leave their atomic ace in their back pocket. Although U.S. strategists did not consider nuclear weapons taboo, they definitely regarded them as the ultimate force for coercion that, while useful for tipping the scales of a war, were nevertheless contradictory to the moral and strategic principles of limited war. Unlike in World War II, the Truman administration was never as desperate, vindictive, or callous enough to use the atomic bomb in Korea and U.S. strategists ultimately denied the use of the bomb because they believed it was excessive and disproportionate to their cause in Korea.

UNLIMITED WAR

Most strategists in the White House and the Pentagon wanted to adapt to the new war with China by restricting U.S. operations in order to localize and limit the conflict and its costs. The Joint Chiefs were just as guilty as MacArthur for underestimating and provoking Peiping, but they quickly promoted a limited war to achieve a political settlement and the administration, with encouragement from Great Britain and other allies, retreated from liberation and the costs that it would require to rollback communism and unify the peninsula. Some strategists, however, championed a military solution in Korea and they adapted to the enlarged threat by calling for an enlarged war – a more

²⁸ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 206–7.

unlimited war against China that resembled the United States' campaigns against Germany and Japan in World War II.

Some strategists did not necessarily endorse escalating and expanding the war, but they still chafed at the constraints that the U.S. experienced and imposed on its war effort because the limits were either costing the United States victory or resulting in higher casualties. For example, in June 1950, just four days after the war began, Clark Clifford expressed concerns that limits on U.S. operations were causing collateral damage. Because American operations were prohibited north of the 38th Parallel, U.S. aircraft were "bombing friendly people and friendly areas" in the towns and cities of South Korea. To avoid further collateral casualties, Clifford wanted Truman to ask the UN to issue an order which would give North Korean forces forty-eight hours to withdraw from South Korea. If they refused to do so, UN forces would bomb military objectives in North Korea.²⁹ John Foster Dulles also opposed the constraints on U.S. efforts because he thought it was impossible for the U.S. and UN to fully achieve their goals while fighting with one hand tied behind their backs. In a speech at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City on December 29, he criticized the limits that the U.S. had levied in the war: "In Korea, the United Nations forces suffer the grave handicap of trying to repel an aggressor within the limited area he selected for an attack, at the time he selected, and with methods of war which are dictated by the terrain and the weather he selected."³⁰ Dulles still hoped to avoid a general or world war but he worried that limited efforts would not achieve maximum results.

Air Force commanders despised the limits on their operations most of all and claimed that the U.S. should have waged an unlimited air war from the start in order to achieve decisive victory

²⁹ Clark M. Clifford to Harry S. Truman, June 29, 1950; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

³⁰ State Department Press Release 1265, December 28, 1950; Massive Chinese Communist Intervention and Allied Reactions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

and save lives on both sides. General Thomas Power who had led the attack on Tokyo in March 1945 later lamented that the Truman administration had been unwilling to use nuclear weapons in Korea. He wrote in his 1965 memoir: “We sacrificed the lives of over 50,000 Americans in Korea because we did not wish to use nuclear weapons against Red China although we could have ended and won that war virtually overnight.”³¹ General Curtis LeMay, who had been the head of Strategic Air Command (SAC) at the time, recalled that the air war in Korea was not a strategic air campaign – “we never did hit a strategic target,” he remembered. When asked if there were any strategic lessons from Korea, LeMay replied that Korea taught “How not to use the strategic air weapon.” He expounded that at the start of the war, he slipped a message “under the carpet” at the Pentagon suggesting that the military should “turn SAC loose with incendiaries on some North Korean towns.” But the administration said (also under the carpet) “that there would be too many civilian casualties” and the U.S. could not do that. More than thirty years later LeMay was still exasperated by that answer and explained:

So we went over there and fought the war and eventually burned down every town in North Korea anyway, some way or another, and some in South Korea, too. We even burned down Pusan – an accident, but we burned it down anyway... Over a period of three years or so, we killed off – what – twenty percent of the population of [North] Korea as direct casualties of war, or from starvation and exposure? Over a period of three years, this seemed to be acceptable to everybody, but to kill a few people at the start right away, no, we can't seem to stomach that.³²

As strange as it may seem, Air Force generals criticized the limited air war because they thought it was immoral and that it would have been *more* ethical to wage an unlimited campaign with overwhelming force from the start to achieve decisive victory and save lives in the long run.

The Republic of Korea also opposed limited war and saw American restraints as a betrayal of their cause. Since both North and South Korea were fighting for the unification of their country

³¹ Thomas S. Power with Albert A. Arnheim, *Design for Survival* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1965), 50.

³² Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 87-88.

and the survival or total victory of their respective regimes, each side waged an unlimited war. Because South Korea aimed to overthrow the DPRK and democratize all of Korea, ROK officials continually exhorted the United States to enlarge its commitment and threatened to do whatever it took to defeat the communists. The ROK itself thus imperiled limited war and the Truman administration had to constrain not only its own operations but hold back the ally it was trying to protect in order to keep South Korea from enlarging the war and endangering world peace. Containment in Korea thus cut every which way as the U.S. had to contain communism, limit its operations, localize the conflict, and restrain its strategic partner in order to avoid a wider war.

President Syngman Rhee rejected limited ends and their limited means. He wanted to talk to Truman and MacArthur about bombing Manchuria and Meredith Weatherby, a State Department officer, told Acheson that “It is doubtful, however, that any words or logic could sway the President from his insistence that Korea must be unified at whatever risk or cost.”³³ Indeed, Ambassador John Muccio had warned Dean Rusk in February 1951 that if the United States did not contain its own ally, South Korea itself might expand and escalate the war. Now that the combat had stabilized near the original border, U.S. officials began to talk about ending the war back where it had started and signing an armistice along the 38th Parallel. Muccio warned, however, that any attempt to reestablish the parallel would “bring a violent explosion from all Koreans” and the U.S. would struggle control ROK forces and keep them within the bounds of the conflict.³⁴

On March 16, 1951, ROK Defense Minister Shin Song-mo spoke against a stalemate and called on the United Nations to unify all of Korea. He claimed that the “so-called 38th Parallel” did not exist. Shin explained, “the 38th Parallel ceased to exist as a dividing line when the North Korean

³³ Meredith Weatherby to Dean Acheson, March 17, 1951; Restudy of the Question of the 38th Parallel, Box 9, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

³⁴ John J. Muccio to Dean Rusk, February 12, 1951; Restudy of the Question of the 38th Parallel, Box 9, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

Communists launched their invasion” and the minister demanded that “there should never again be such a line, marking a division which is resented by the entire Korean public.” He also warned that if the UN stopped at the parallel, “the noble blood of the UN soldiers has been shed in vain,” and the fighting in Korea would have been for naught since communist forces would simply regroup in North Korea and then attack the ROK another time. Shin declared, “Unless the Chinese invaders are severely punished for the untold hardships inflicted on millions of innocent civilians and for the tremendous destruction of life and property in Korea, the victory which we are winning today would be meaningless. Victory would become failure if the invaders were allowed to have sanctuary north of the 38th Parallel and they would again raise their invading forces and launch another attack whenever they chose to do so.” Shin therefore called for the UN to destroy the Chinese invaders and unify Korea in accordance with the will of the [South] Korean people because a restoration of the status quo ante would be intolerable:

The Korean people would willingly die en masse defending their Fatherland and preventing the re-establishment of the 38th Parallel in preference to seeing their land again divided.

The whole object of the war by the United Nations is to secure the freedom and independence of Korea by repelling the Communist invader. This object cannot be achieved if Korea is to be again divided, North from South, by an arbitrary and artificial line of demarcation. Many lives have been given to fulfill this objective and it would be breaking faith with the dead heroes of the Korean and UN forces to fail to carry out the mission for which they fought.³⁵

For the Republic of Korea, victory – total, decisive, and uncompromising – was the only option.

Without victory, there was only failure, defeat, and humiliation.

The United States continued to resist Korean pleas for total victory and all-out war, however. In a press conference shortly after Shin made his remarks, General Ridgway announced that if the war ended at the 38th Parallel it would be a “tremendous victory for the United Nations.”

³⁵ Office of Public Information, Republic of Korea, March 15, 1951; Restudy of the Question of the 38th Parallel, Box 9, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

Although the defense minister wanted to disregard the parallel and push the communists completely out of Korea, Weatherby pointed out that the UN policy was to establish a united, independent, and democratic Korea, but there was no commitment that required the UN or the U.S. to use force to do that. He reminded ROK officials that “the worst possible development, both for Korea and for the world, would be for hostilities to spread.”³⁶ For the United States, therefore, a limited war had become an objective all its own. Containing the war was as important as containing communism. Unlike in World War II, U.S. strategists did not think that a wider war was merely unnecessary or contrary to America’s best interests, nor a regrettable circumstance that the U.S. would prefer to avoid but would absolutely prevail if it came. Rather, U.S. strategists emphasized that a wider war was to be avoided at all costs. For the United States, an enlarged war that could become a world or nuclear war was intolerable and unjustified – there was no possible benefit or potential victory that could compensate for the costs of such a catastrophe – and that made it immoral.

The most celebrated proponent of unlimited war, however – as well as the most visible and vocal – was General Douglas MacArthur. Just as Curtis LeMay came to embody the United States’ victory-at-all-costs attitude in World War II, MacArthur came to exemplify the “uncompromising warrior” for his approach in Korea. That is not to say that MacArthur wanted to start World War III or a wider war with the Soviet Union, he abhorred the idea of both. He never proposed to invade Manchuria or China with ground forces, and he did not recommend using the atomic bomb. Nevertheless, MacArthur favored annihilation over attrition, and he called for a more unlimited war in order to achieve victory over Chinese forces rather than a limited war for limited war’s sake. To win in Korea, therefore, MacArthur proposed a series of aggressive and combative strategies

³⁶ Meredith Weatherby to Dean Acheson, March 17, 1951; Restudy of the Question of the 38th Parallel, Box 9, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

including a strategic bombing and blockade campaign against the Chinese mainland and the recruitment of Chinese nationalists to open a second front against communist China.³⁷

Just like the campaigns against Germany and Japan, a strategic bombing campaign could destroy China's capacity for war, but the Truman administration rejected the plan because officials thought it was immoral and impossible. Like hot pursuit or the bombing of Manchuria, strategic bombing would escalate the conflict and likely provoke a wider war with China and the Soviet Union, and the administration believed the costs of a larger war would be intolerable. General Vandenberg also admitted that the Air Force did not have sufficient strategic bombers for such a large campaign.³⁸

MacArthur also considered blockading China and bombarding military and industrial targets along the Chinese coast but, here too, he ran into moral and logistical obstacles. The U.S. Navy, for one, remonstrated that even if it could spare the warships from other responsibilities or positions, they would not be able to establish a successful blockade or effectively damage China's coast. The British opposed a blockade because it would interfere with their trade between Hong Kong and China and officials pointed out that a blockade would have little effect since much of China's trade moved overland along the wide Sino-Soviet border.³⁹ MacArthur did not plan to use nuclear weapons, but many Americans wished he would. In Montana, "a draft board refused to call another man until MacArthur had been authorized to use the atom bomb as he saw fit in China."⁴⁰ Blockading and bombarding China, however, ran the same moral and diplomatic risks as a strategic

³⁷ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 196–97.

³⁸ James and Wells, 202.

³⁹ James and Wells, 202–3.

⁴⁰ Rovere and Schlesinger, *The General and the President and the Future of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), 156.

bombing campaign and, as the Truman administration remained committed to localizing the war, it rejected proposals to extend the war beyond Korea's borders.

Lastly, MacArthur proposed to expand and escalate the war by using Formosa's territory or its troops to attack China. Truman had sent the Seventh Fleet to the Strait of Formosa after North Korea's initial invasion to keep the Chinese communists and nationalists at arms-length and limit the friction between the two, but MacArthur wanted to pit the island against the mainland. Even before the outbreak of war, MacArthur had submitted a position paper on the strategic importance of Formosa and, since then, he had pushed for a broader defense of the island and wanted to enlist nationalist troops in the Korean War.⁴¹ After China's offensive in November, the head of UN Command became more insistent about using forces from Formosa to save American lives, but the Truman administration once again rejected the idea of escalating and expanding the war. The President and his advisors maintained that restarting the Chinese Civil War between Chinese nationalists and communists would unleash diplomatic, military, and moral horrors.⁴²

Truman, the JCS, and other strategists argued that unlimited war was too risky and costly because it could provoke a wider war with the Soviet Union and exact too many lives. But despite his misreading of Chinese intentions and the battlefield situation, MacArthur was never oblivious to the possibility of a general or world war. He repeatedly insisted though, that his operations would not draw the USSR into the war because Soviet intervention would be determined by the Kremlin's own interests and timetable. As for the human costs of a more unlimited war, MacArthur contended that a decisive annihilation strategy would cost fewer lives in the long run than a prolonged and indecisive attrition strategy that could drag out the costs of war for years. Indeed, while the Truman

⁴¹ Douglas MacArthur, "Formosa Must be Defended," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 16, no. 23 (September 15, 1950): 708-709.

⁴² James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 203-4.

administration and subsequent proponents of limited war accused MacArthur of escalating and expanding the war which could cost countless lives, MacArthur essentially accused the Truman administration of extending the war and risking American and Asian lives. Most of all though, MacArthur justified a more unlimited war because, as he famously asserted, there was no substitute for victory, and MacArthur was willing to escalate and expand the war – and the costs that the UN would have to exact and endure – because he believed that nothing was more important than victory.

MacArthur's proposals and his outspoken defiance of UN and U.S. directives at the end of 1950 made American allies nervous. Hot pursuit, bombing Manchuria, and the possible use of nuclear weapons had already caused a certain amount of hyperventilating at the UN, but Truman had shown that he was a level-headed leader while MacArthur had an international reputation as a military maverick. NATO members, therefore, raised concerns about MacArthur's manners and tactics, and U.S. diplomats tried to reassure them that the United States remained committed to limiting and localizing the Korean War to achieve the UN's stated objectives.

In Canada, Foreign Minister Lester Pearson expressed concerns about MacArthur's statements, claiming that the general's tone was not helpful and could make matters worse. He also thought the general had exceeded the scope of his activity as UN commander and insinuated himself into international politics.⁴³ French officials knew MacArthur's reputation and worried what the *enfant terrible* might do while officials at the State Department tried to reassure them that MacArthur was under "the strictest orders not to violate the frontier in any way."⁴⁴ In Belgium, officials fretted over rumors about the policy divergence between MacArthur and Washington. Paul-Henri Spaak,

⁴³ Douglas MacArthur II, Memo of Conversation, November 7, 1950; Allied Criticisms of the UN Commander, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁴⁴ G. Hayden Raynor, Memo of Conversation, November 24, 1950; Allied Criticisms of the UN Commander, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

the President of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe noted that Western Europe's attitude was more cautious than their American allies and they were ready to cut their losses in the Far East if it would avert a general war.⁴⁵

The British sweated over MacArthur too. State telegrams indicated that British public opinion and the House of Commons were growing anxious about whether MacArthur would commit UN forces to large-scale hostilities with China. Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, conceded that MacArthur should be allowed some discretion within broad limits to conduct the campaign as he saw fit, but he still thought it best that MacArthur have detailed instructions. Bevin also wanted the U.S. ambassador to give assurances that MacArthur's objective amounted to no more and no less than UN objectives and that he was as much the general for the UN as for the United States. If the U.S. was contemplating any action beyond MacArthur's mandate, Bevin wanted the Truman administration to consult confidentially with those states providing forces to Korea and agree not to authorize MacArthur to proceed unless those states gave express agreement. The U.S. was largely calling the shots at the UN and in Korea, but the British wanted some kind of grip on MacArthur's arms. Acheson asked ambassador Julius C. Holmes to reassure Bevin that MacArthur's objectives matched the stated objectives of the UN resolutions and that U.S. directives did not intend anything more or beside the declared UN intentions. Acheson also pointed out that, despite his individualist persona, MacArthur had shown great restraint in recent weeks "under grave provocation and considerable danger."⁴⁶

Three days later, however, Holmes reported that the British were becoming apprehensive about the global drift toward another world war. They worried that military necessity might lead to

⁴⁵ Robert D. Murphy to Dean Acheson, December 5, 1950; Allied Criticisms of the UN Commander, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁴⁶ Dean Acheson to Julius C. Holmes, November 27, 1950; Allied Criticisms of the UN Commander, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

the bombing of Manchuria and that Syngman Rhee and the ROK were flouting UN orders. The British feel that “every reasonable avenue should be carefully explored to avoid war,” Holmes wrote. The British worried especially, naturally, about what another world war would mean for the United Kingdom – financial consequences, shortages of raw materials, and their own dependence on the United States – and perhaps some were regretting the special ties that hitched the British wagon to the American horse.⁴⁷

Holmes also noted, however, that British anxieties centered mostly on MacArthur: “In this general atmosphere current Korean developments have brought to a head widespread and long-standing distrust of MacArthur whose military ability as well as political judgment now being questioned,” he explained. According to Holmes, there was a widespread feeling that UN forces should have stopped short of the Manchurian border and that if they had, the current crisis with China could have been avoided. Defense Minister Manny Shinwell criticized MacArthur for moving past the 38th Parallel and claimed that the British had tried to convince the U.S. that their objectives should remain limited. No government could have worked harder to prevent trouble, he asserted.⁴⁸ Former Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Conservative leader Anthony Eden likewise announced that the UN’s goal should have been to stabilize Korea around the “waist.” Despite the concerns, Bevin, Churchill, and Eden advocated for Anglo-American unity and suggested that this was no time for petty criticism of MacArthur. But Holmes observed that the British public would not be satisfied with “routine statements expressing confidence and support for him.” The Truman administration had to give reasons for their confidence and explain why the campaign had to reach the Yalu and why U.S. intelligence had failed. Holmes also encouraged Acheson to stress the

⁴⁷ Julius C. Holmes to Dean Acheson, November 30, 1950; Julius C. Holmes to Dean Acheson, December 4, 1950; Allied Criticisms of the UN Commander, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁴⁸ Holmes pointed out, however, that Shinwell’s remarks were inconsistent with statements that the Bevin had made in the House of Commons and that the American press would scold Shinwell for it.

importance of collective security in Korea and remind the world that peace is only preserved by resisting aggression. Allied fears might be assuaged if the U.S. reaffirmed that it would not take unilateral action in Korea and that the general operations were governed by UN decisions.⁴⁹

THE GENERAL VS. THE PRESIDENT

After the new year, Chinese forces continued to advance south and, in the third battle of Seoul the communists seized the capital for the second time on January 4, 1951. The sudden withdrawal by UN forces and the occupation of Seoul by the communists deepened the divide among U.S. strategists. Now that the Chinese had recaptured half the peninsula, those who favored withdrawal thought the U.S. should cut its losses and get out of Korea. Others thought it was even more imperative that the U.S. hold the line against communism, and MacArthurites pushed even harder to escalate and expand the war to defeat communism. Everyone agreed, however, that the situation was dire and required drastic action.

In Washington, both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate passed resolutions calling on the UN to “immediately declare Communist China is an aggressor in Korea.”⁵⁰ For Congressmen who wanted to withdraw, the resolutions sounded a parting shot of defiance, and for those who wanted to escalate, the resolutions justified expanded operations. The White House was moving towards withdrawal, however. The Korean Ambassador, John Chang, liked the idea of evacuating U.S. and ROK forces to Cheju Island or perhaps Japan where military operations could be continued. In any event, Chang told Dean Rusk that he hoped the UN would make provision for Korean refugees because Korean government personnel and education leaders would be killed by

⁴⁹ Julius C. Holmes to Dean Acheson, November 30, 1950; Julius C. Holmes to Dean Acheson, December 4, 1950; Allied Criticisms of the UN Commander, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁵⁰ House Resolution no. 77, January 19, 1951; Senate Resolution no. 35, January 23, 1951; Senate Resolution no. 37, January 23, 1951; U.S. Effort to Obtain UN Action re Chinese Intervention, Box 8, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

the communists if they were not evacuated.⁵¹ On January 15, Truman gave MacArthur instructions for successful resistance in Korea. The President wanted it to be clear though, that, if worse came to worse and the United States had to withdraw from the peninsula, the U.S. vacated Korea out of military necessity.⁵² That same day, however, General Matthew Ridgway and the U.S. Eighth Army finally stopped the Chinese advance and, as the fighting began to stabilize, the arguments for withdrawal and escalation lost their urgency.⁵³

MacArthur didn't lose his, however. After Ridgway's successful rearguard action, MacArthur soon developed plans for regaining the liberation initiative. He wanted to expand air operations, use naval surface forces against the Chinese mainland, deploy Chinese nationalist divisions from Formosa, and have four U.S. divisions sent to the Far East Command instead of NATO in Western Europe. He even threatened, petulantly, to abandon Korea if he did not receive approval for some or all of his plans. Once again though, the Truman administration resisted MacArthur's pleas and rejected plans for a wider war with China and the difference in policy eventually culminated in a showdown between the general and the President.⁵⁴

MacArthur had always been an unruly general but never a rogue one. He was difficult to manage because he was independent, vain, and ambitious – a problematic character in an army general – and MacArthur also consistently separated military and political spheres which made him resistant to executive or legislative oversight. Although Roosevelt managed to tame him during World War II, MacArthur frequently strained against his political leash and, after the Pacific campaigns made him a war-hero, he considered challenging Truman for the presidency in 1948. In

⁵¹ Arthur B. Emmons, Memo of Conversation, January 8, 1951; Massive Chinese Communist Intervention and Allied Reactions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁵² Harry S. Truman to Douglas MacArthur, January 15, 1951; Massive Chinese Communist Intervention and Allied Reactions, Box 7, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁵³ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 202.

⁵⁴ James and Wells, 202.

Korea he often stretched directives from the JCS, and he defied the President's orders to come to Washington for meetings, claiming he could not leave the situation in Japan.⁵⁵

The administration picked its battles but, after October 1950, the differences between MacArthur and Washington became more pronounced and ineluctable as MacArthur began to attack Truman's Asia policy through interviews, letters, and press releases. Thereafter, MacArthur not only bucked against political oversight but the restrictive girth of limited war. Annoyed by the general's persistent unruliness, Truman issued two directives on December 6 in which he ordered all U.S. officials to clear their public statements on foreign or military policy with the State or Defense Departments and to exercise caution in their pronouncements. The directives tacitly ordered the general not to steady the foreign policy ark, but MacArthur refused to muzzle himself and continued to defy Truman and violated the orders.⁵⁶

MacArthur's arguments for a more unlimited war became less relevant but no less irritating to the administration after Ridgway and the Eighth Army halted the Chinese advance and stabilized the fighting in Korea. Administration officials felt frustrated with MacArthur's obstreperous behavior, his importunate proposals, and his strategic ignorance about local and global military and diplomatic realities. U.S. officials also decided that the security of Western Europe took precedence over East Asia while MacArthur always thought Asia was the center of world events and should be the top priority for U.S. foreign policy.⁵⁷

MacArthur committed the final straw on March 24, 1951. After receiving word that the State Department would begin overtures that could lead to peace negotiations, MacArthur unilaterally

⁵⁵ James and Wells, 197–98, 207–8; for the “taming” of MacArthur during World War II see Mark Perry, *The Most Dangerous Man in America: The Making of Douglas MacArthur* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

⁵⁶ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 197, 203–4.

⁵⁷ James and Wells, 205–6.

issued an ultimatum to the commander of Chinese forces and threatened to expand the war against mainland China. MacArthur noted that the UN forces had “cleared South Korea of organized Communist forces.” Bombardment had destroyed the enemy’s supplies and left the Chinese unable to sustain their operations while Chinese “human wave” and infiltration tactics had failed. More importantly, despite its numerical advantages, China lacked the industrial capacity, manufacturing base, and raw materials to sustain its operations and MacArthur asserted that the disparity between UN and Chinese capabilities could not be overcome “by bravery, however fanatical, or the most gross indifference of human losses.” China’s military weaknesses meant that it could not conquer Korea and MacArthur implied that if the U.S. decided to remove its self-limitations, China could be ruined. He announced, “The enemy therefore must by now be painfully aware that a decision of the United Nations to depart from its tolerant effort to contain the war to the area of Korea through expansion of our military operations to his coastal areas and interior bases would doom Red China to the risk of imminent military collapse.” The General then announced that he was prepared to talk with the commander of Chinese forces and settle the Korean War according to the political objectives of the UN without bloodshed.⁵⁸

MacArthur’s presumptuous and insubordinate announcement both threatened to expand and escalate the war and ruined the chance for peace talks. The President, the White House, and the Pentagon had made it clear that the United States wanted to avoid a wider war with China, but the general continued to press for a more unlimited one. MacArthur’s ultimatum caused three additional headaches. First, as the JCS explained, the statement had embarrassed the United States government which now had to assuage the apprehensions of thirteen allies. Second, the statement raised questions about how many people were talking for the United States. Who was in charge of

⁵⁸ William J. Sebald to Dean Acheson, March 24, 1951; The Proposed Presidential Statement and Gen MacArthur's Statement of March 24, 1951, Box 9, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

negotiating – the State Department? The UN? MacArthur? Third, the JCS had to handle the matter of military discipline. Truman’s directives in December had required U.S. officials to clear their statements with Washington and MacArthur had deliberately violated the order. The JCS were in a tough spot. In his conversation with the Chiefs, Robert Lovett noted, “it would be perfectly obvious if it were anybody else who had made the statement which MacArthur made yesterday, he would be relieved of his command at once. However, the JCS recognized that the consequences of relieving MacArthur are startling... On the other hand, they do not feel that they can just let this slide by.” For the moment then, the JCS considered a reprimand for MacArthur, rather than relief.⁵⁹ Lovett also observed that MacArthur seemed to embody the will of the people; all the press reactions to MacArthur’s statement “indicated that this was probably the most popular public statement anyone has ever made.” Lovett therefore concluded that Truman and the JCS should kill the issue with “as much silence as possible about it.” The Defense Department would reprove MacArthur while State would try to persuade the other governments that MacArthur’s statement came from a commander in the field and did not represent official U.S. policy.⁶⁰ The ultimatum was the last straw for Truman, however. The general had publicly broken with the President and his policies too many times and Truman had had enough. He privately decided that day to remove MacArthur.

The controversy between the general and the President grew more bitter, however, as it became more public. On April 5, hoping to boost support for MacArthur, House minority leader Joseph W. Martin Jr. (R-MA) read a letter on the House floor that the general had written to him on March 20. In his letter, MacArthur explained that in Korea he had followed the “conventional pattern of meeting force with maximum counter force as we have never failed to do in the past.” He

⁵⁹ Part of the problem, Lovett pointed out, was that MacArthur held four separate commands and recalling him would break up the command structure.

⁶⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, March 24, 1951; SOSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

simply could not understand the concept of limited war. In a way, MacArthur was out of touch. He had not been in Washington since 1935 and therefore had not been involved in the development of Truman's containment doctrine and Cold War grand strategy. He also remained a West Point man through and through and he knew no other strategic imperative than to win on the battlefield. The theory of limited war was also unprecedented and ran counter to everything he had been taught as a soldier. The entire purpose of war was victory; the United States had always fought for victory. If the U.S. was not fighting for decisive victory in Korea, what were U.S. soldiers doing there?

MacArthur added:

It seems strangely difficult for some to realize that here in Asia is where the Communist conspirators have elected to make their play for global conquest, and that we have joined the issue thus raised on the battlefield; that here we fight Europe's war with arms while the diplomats there still fight it with words; that if we lose the war to communism in Asia the fall of Europe is inevitable, win it and Europe most probably would avoid war and yet preserve freedom. As you point out, we must win. There is no substitute for victory.⁶¹

As MacArthur saw it, the U.S. wasn't just fighting for victory over communism in Korea, but throughout Asia and the entire world. The Korean War was not a sideshow or a distraction from the Cold War, it *was* the Cold War. By fighting a limited war, the Truman administration had substituted containment for victory which, MacArthur insisted, was contrary to the principles of warfare.

MacArthur's epistolary criticisms infuriated Democrats and the White House. On April 9, 1951, Truman met with Acheson, Marshall, Bradley, and Averell Harriman to discuss the situation and all four advisors concurred on removing MacArthur. They agreed that the general was not following the principles of limited war (and might not obey orders to limit the war), he had violated Truman's directive about making public statements, he had not planned effectively for military eventualities, and he had jeopardized the rule of civilian control over the military.⁶² Two days later,

⁶¹ Douglas MacArthur to Joseph W. Martin, March 20, 1951; *The Dismissal of General MacArthur*, Box 9, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

⁶² James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 209–11.

Truman fired MacArthur. The White House invited reporters to the newsroom at 1 AM for a special announcement and President Truman disclosed his decision to relieve MacArthur, his dismissal addressed to MacArthur, and the formal notification replacing MacArthur with General Ridgway.⁶³ Because of a mix-up, however, Secretary of the Army Frank Pace was unable to bring the orders to MacArthur in Tokyo personally, and so the old warrior learned of his termination on public radio which only exacerbated the drama and personal animosity of the whole affair.

That same day, President Truman defended his decision to relieve MacArthur and limit the Korean War in a national address from the White House. The President began: "I want to talk to you plainly tonight about what we are doing in Korea and about our policy in the Far East. In the simplest terms, what we are doing in Korea is this: We are trying to prevent a third world war." Fighting a war to prevent a war may have sounded illogical but Truman's point was that if the United States did not step in to stop communist aggression, communism would continue to attack free areas of the world just like Hitler had and that would bring on another world war. The President explained: "The Communists in the Kremlin are engaged in a monstrous conspiracy to stamp out freedom all over the world. If they were to succeed, the United States would be numbered among their principal victims. It must be clear to everyone that the United States cannot – and will not – sit idly by and await foreign conquest."⁶⁴

The best way to meet the communist threat was to stamp it out as soon as possible – "It is easier to put out a fire in the beginning when it is small than after it has become a roaring blaze," Truman explained. To extinguish aggression, free, peace-loving nations needed to stand together and "check the aggressive designs of the Soviet Union before they can result in a third world war."

⁶³ Rovere and Schlesinger, *The General and the President*, 170-171.

⁶⁴ Radio Report to the American People on Korea and on U.S. Policy in the Far East, April 11, 1951; Public Papers, HSTPL.

In Greece and Berlin, the free world stood up to aggression and forced international communism to back down and now, in Korea, communism had made its “boldest and most dangerous move” yet. Truman claimed that the attack on Korea was part of a master communist plan to conquer Asia but insisted that Koreans should be free to work out their own destiny. Hence the war.

The question the president posed, however, was “whether the Communist plan of conquest can be stopped without a general war.” The U.S. government and its allies at the UN believed that the best way to stop communism without a general or preventive war was “to meet the attack in Korea and defeat it there. That is what we have been doing,” Truman announced and, so far, the U.S. had been successful. “So far, we have prevented world war III” and “by fighting a limited war in Korea, we have prevented aggression from succeeding, and bringing on a general war.” Having halted the communist offensive, the decision to provoke or preclude another world war now lay with the Kremlin. Perhaps the communists would choose to expand the conflict, the President acknowledged. They could choose war or peace but, Truman declared:

The decision is theirs, because the forces of the United Nations will strive to limit the conflict if possible. We do not want to see the conflict in Korea extended. We are trying to prevent a world war – not to start one. And the best way to do that is to make it plain that we and the other free countries will continue to resist the attack.

But if the United States aimed to stop communist aggression, why not take steps to destroy it *before* it threatened world peace, or why not destroy it totally and decisively so that it could never threaten the world again like Francis Matthews, Harold Stassen, George Craig, and Douglas MacArthur had suggested? As Truman put it, “why can’t we take other steps to punish the aggressor. Why don’t we bomb Manchuria and China itself? Why don’t we assist the Chinese Nationalist troops to land on the mainland of China?” The President answered, “If we were to do these things we would be running a very grave risk of starting a general war. If that were to happen,

we would have brought about the exact situation we are trying to prevent.” Preventive war and unlimited war would thus embroil the United States in an intolerable general war in Asia.

Truman admitted that the United States might still become involved in a general or world war despite its best efforts to avoid it. “It may well be that, in spite of our best efforts, the Communists may spread the war,” he conceded. “But it would be wrong – tragically wrong – for us to take the initiative in extending the war,” he declared. The United States had stopped the spread of communism in Korea, now it was trying to stop the spread of war in Korea and Truman announced that the course his administration had been following (and the one MacArthur had been criticizing) was “the one best calculated to avoid an all-out war.” The President confirmed that he had “thought long and hard” about extending the war and had discussed it many times with his military advisers but he still believed the U.S. was taking the best course and had to limit the war in order to “make sure that the precious lives of our fighting men are not wasted; to see that the security of our country and the free world is not needlessly jeopardized; and to prevent a third world war.”

General MacArthur did not agree with Truman’s limited war strategy and so the President had removed him “so that there would be no doubt or confusion as to the real purpose and aim of our policy.”⁶⁵ The U.S. was ready to negotiate a peace settlement, but Truman denied that the U.S. was appeasing the communists. After all, “real peace” meant a permanent end to the fighting, an end to aggression, and a settlement that would allow for the withdrawal of all foreign forces and the unification of Korea. “In the meantime, I want to be clear about our military objective,” Truman announced. The United States was fighting “to resist an outrageous aggression in Korea” and “to keep the Korean conflict from spreading to other areas” while insuring the security of its own

⁶⁵ Despite serious objections by Secretary of Defense George Marshall, Truman proceeded in his speech to explain why he had relieved MacArthur. George C. Marshall to Paul Nitze, April 11, 1951; Korea – MacArthur – Foreign Policy, Box 64, Subject File, 1916-1995, GMEP, HSTPL.

forces. “That is our military objective,” the President declared, “to repel attack and to restore peace.” But in so doing, the United States would not start a third world war. “That war can come if the Communist rulers want it to come,” he concluded. “But this Nation and its allies will not be responsible for its coming. We do not want to widen the conflict. We will use every effort to prevent that disaster.”⁶⁶

Meanwhile, MacArthur never disputed Truman’s right to relieve him but, after being fired, he claimed not to know why. “No more subordinate soldier has ever worn the American uniform,” he declared with sincere self-deception. MacArthur blamed the President and the State Department for the stalemate in Korea and claimed that all the military leaders agreed with him. His reproofs went so far as to criticize civilian and political oversight of the military as he tried to widen the divide between the White House and the Pentagon, and between State and Defense, but his statements merely exposed how out of touch he was with the war and his military superiors. Marshall and the JCS would have been justified in court-martialing MacArthur, but they could not bring themselves to convict one of their own who had served with such distinction for so long. A court-martial also likely would have killed the political careers of Harry Truman and Dean Acheson who were weakened by McCarthyism and abysmal ratings. Truman’s public approval score after removing MacArthur was worse than Nixon’s after Watergate, D. Clayton James has noted.⁶⁷

Indeed, firing MacArthur ignited one of the hottest political firestorms in American history. Rovere and Schlesinger estimated that nothing had matched the “political passion” of the general’s “patriotic exile,” since the Civil War.⁶⁸ In the five days after MacArthur’s removal, the White House received 13,000 letters, telegrams, and notes, and more than two of every three opposed the

⁶⁶ Radio Report to the American People on Korea and on U.S. Policy in the Far East, April 11, 1951; Public Papers, HSTPL.

⁶⁷ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 212–14.

⁶⁸ Rovere and Schlesinger, *The General and the President and the Future of American Foreign Policy*, 5.

President's decision while hundreds called for his impeachment. In some places, Truman and Acheson were burned in effigy, towns and states passed resolutions against the President, and some isolated cases of violence broke out between supporters of MacArthur and Truman.⁶⁹ Most historians have vindicated Truman but his decision to fire MacArthur won the President a Pyrrhic political victory and nearly cost him his presidency.⁷⁰

The rift between the general and the President was caused, in part, by a breakdown in communications and command. To a degree, the administration was at fault, because it failed to issue new directives and MacArthur continued to think that his ultimate objective was to unify the peninsula and drive the communists out of Korea. None of Truman's advisors or even the JCS had much contact with the head of UN Command and later, when he testified to Congress, MacArthur's statements showed that the JCS had not conveyed their feelings or purposes effectively. They had largely appeased MacArthur instead of demanding obedience. Perhaps, if the JCS had shortened MacArthur's leash, the confrontation with Truman could have been avoided. Ultimately, the estrangement between the two men became deeply personal as well. Truman and MacArthur only met once, for a brief meeting on Wake Island on October 15, 1950, but, as D. Clayton James observed, "Despite the fact that they had never met before and were never to talk again, they would go to their graves implacable enemies." MacArthur was also undoubtedly insubordinate and violated the tenets of civilian control over the military. President Franklin Roosevelt had once named MacArthur "the most dangerous man in America" and William Manchester, a later biographer who also fought in the Pacific, would designate the general an "American Caesar." But MacArthur also held conservative views about the Constitution, military traditions, and even civilian authority, and

⁶⁹ Rovere and Schlesinger, *The General and the President and the Future of American Foreign Policy*, 12-13.

⁷⁰ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 213-14, 217.

James asserts that “there was no genuine threat to the principle of civilian supremacy over the military in this case.”⁷¹

The most critical breach between Truman and MacArthur, therefore, was not founded on miscommunication, personal animosity, or even strictly insubordination, it grew out of their different values, attitudes, and ethics about war which were manifested in their definitions of victory and their levels of tolerance for the human costs of war. Truman favored a limited war to contain communism while MacArthur promoted an unlimited war to rollback communism and liberate Korea. The President wanted to limit and localize the war in Korea to avoid a wider war with China and the Soviet Union, and he rejected a total or more unlimited war that could escalate and expand the conflict into a general world war or nuclear war. MacArthur, on the other hand, sought to un-limit the war, and he was willing to accept the risks and costs of war with China to achieve decisive victory. MacArthur’s ultimatum on March 24 that threatened war against China proved to be the precipitate act that triggered Truman’s private decision to fire the general.

MacArthur Homecoming & Speech

Having been relieved of command, MacArthur returned to his homeland for the first time in nearly fifteen years. Though perhaps not the “heaven-born general” that William Pitt had once called Robert Clive, MacArthur nevertheless looked like a general to Americans. Indeed, he performed the role so distinctively that he was almost a parody and, to this day, is often regarded as the quintessential American general. Whether he was dressed in his conspicuously understated army uniform, holding a corncob pipe between his teeth, or wearing now-famous aviator sunglasses, MacArthur’s granite features, hawkish nose, and aristocratic bearing looked like they’d been ordered

⁷¹ James and Wells, 201, 214–17; William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur, 1880-1964*, 1st ed (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978); H. W. Brands, *The General vs. the President: MacArthur and Truman at the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York; London; Toronto: Doubleday, 2016).

specially from Central Casting. The Hollywood general touched down in San Francisco on April 18 and his homecoming became so rapturous that some commentators dubbed it “The Second Coming of Douglas MacArthur.”⁷² To prepare for the general’s triumph in Washington, Truman’s advisors began circulating a sardonic itinerary which, despite its mocking humor, reflected their genuine concerns about MacArthur’s popularity and vanity, his resistance to the President’s oversight, and his commitment to overwhelming force, regardless of the costs:

12:30	Wades ashore from Snorkel submarine.
12:31	Navy Band plays “Sparrow in the treetop” and “I’ll be glad when you’re dead you rascal you.”
12:40	Parade to the Capitol with General MacArthur riding an elephant.
12:47	Be-heading of [Truman’s military aide] General [Harry] Vaughan at the rotunda.
1:00	General MacArthur addresses Members of the Congress.
1:30-1:49	Applause for General MacArthur
1:50	Burning of the Constitution.
1:55	Lynching of Secretary Acheson.
2:00	21-atomic bomb salute.
2:30	300 nude D.A.R.’s leap from Washington Monument.
3:00	Basket lunch, Monument grounds. ⁷³

There would be no elephants or executions upon MacArthur’s arrival but on April 19, the general did address both houses of Congress where he offered an eloquent and powerful defense of his actions in Korea and his ideas of unlimited war. Rebutting the President’s speech eight days earlier, MacArthur recounted the strategic importance of Asia, the threat of communism, the aggression of the Soviet Union and communist China in the Far East, and the need for the United States to resist communist aggression and protect its national security. He therefore commended the

⁷² Rovere and Schlesinger, *The General and the President*, 4.

⁷³ Schedule for Welcoming of General Mac Arthur, undated; Korea – MacArthur – Foreign Policy, Box 64, Subject File, 1916-1995, GMEP, HSTPL.

President's "sound" decision to intervene in support of the Republic of Korea and claimed that the war had been won before China invaded North Korea – "we hurled back the invader and decimated his forces," MacArthur declared. "Our victory was complete, and our objectives within reach, when Red China intervened with numerically superior ground forces." China's intervention created a new war "which called for new decisions" to adjust military strategy but MacArthur, with some tact, passively announced that new decisions "have not been forthcoming."⁷⁴

MacArthur reiterated that he never intended to start a ground war in China but China's involvement did require a new strategic plan to achieve victory: "While no man in his right mind would advocate sending our ground forces into continental China, and such was never given a thought, the new situation did urgently demand a drastic revision of strategic planning if our political aim was to defeat this new enemy as we had defeated the old." The United States was now at war with China and, if the U.S. wanted to win, MacArthur argued, it needed to wage a more unlimited war. In the name of military necessity, therefore, the general had called for the U.S. to neutralize enemy sanctuaries north of the Yalu River, establish an "economic blockade against China" and "a naval blockade against the China coast," remove air restrictions for Manchuria and the Chinese coast, and remove the restraints on nationalist forces in Formosa which could support the U.S. in a war "against the common enemy."⁷⁵

MacArthur insisted that these strategies were "designed to support our forces committed to Korea and bring hostilities to an end with the least possible delay and at a saving of countless American and allied lives." In other words, MacArthur claimed that he was fighting the American way; he was trying to win decisively, quickly, and at minimal cost. That was the way he had been

⁷⁴ Transcript of General Douglas MacArthur's Address to Congress, April 19, 1951; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

⁷⁵ Transcript of General Douglas MacArthur's Address to Congress, April 19, 1951; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

taught to fight at West Point and that was the way the United States had fought in the world wars. There was nothing unprecedented or unusual or even unique about his proposals since they had been “fully shared in the past by practically every military leader” in Korea, including the JCS. And yet, MacArthur complained that he had been “severely criticized” for his military views.⁷⁶

In fact, the Truman administration had precluded victory entirely by imposing restrictions and limits on MacArthur’s operations. He called for reinforcements but was told none were available. He told his superiors that the U.S. needed to fight a more unlimited war and was denied. Discomfited, MacArthur had finally explained that if he could not destroy enemy bases across the Yalu, blockade the Chinese coast, or enlist Formosa’s forces, “the position of the command from a military standpoint forbade victory.” UN forces could still hold Korea but, he spelled out, “we could hope at best for only an indecisive campaign with its terrible and constant attrition upon our forces if the enemy utilized its full military potential.”

Critics had distorted his position, MacArthur announced. He had been called a “warmonger”, but the general insisted: “Nothing could be further from the truth. I know war as few other men now living know it, and nothing to me is more revolting. I have long advocated its complete abolition, as its very destructiveness on both friend and foe has rendered it useless as a means of settling international disputes.” MacArthur then quoted his own address from September 2, 1945, when he had accepted Japan’s formal surrender aboard the USS *Missouri*, to argue that the world needed a better process, even a moral rebirth, in order to secure world peace:

Men since the beginning of time have sought peace. Various methods through the ages have been attempted to devise an international process to prevent or settle disputes between nations. . . . Military alliances, balances of power, Leagues of Nations, all in turn failed, leaving the only path to be by way of the crucible of war. The utter destructiveness of war now blocks out this alternative. We have had our last chance. If we will not devise some

⁷⁶ Transcript of General Douglas MacArthur's Address to Congress, April 19, 1951; PSF, *The Korean War and Its Origins*, HSTPL.

greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door. The problem basically is theological and involves a spiritual recrudescence and improvement of human character that will synchronize with our almost matchless advances in science, art, literature, and all material and cultural developments of the past 2000 years. It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh.⁷⁷

A warmonger or a war hawk? God forbid! MacArthur was not a pacifist, but neither was he a jingoist. Rather, he was a peacemaker but there could be no peace in the face of aggression. The United States was right to oppose war, to be cautious and reluctant to go to war but MacArthur argued that once the nation had crossed the Rubicon and cast the die, there could be no turning back and no more hesitancy. He declared, "But once war is forced upon us, there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War's very object is victory, not prolonged indecision. In war there is no substitute for victory." Indeed, MacArthur suggested that anything short of maximum effort and unrestricted means constituted appeasement and was immoral.⁷⁸

The law of history taught that appeasement was not only bad politics or poor strategy but moral folly for, as MacArthur declared, "history teaches with unmistakable emphasis that appeasement but begets new and bloodier war. It points to no single instance where this end has justified that means, where appeasement has led to more than a sham peace." Again, MacArthur showed that he could not understand the concept of limited war and his men did not either: "Why, my soldiers asked of me, 'surrender military advantages to an enemy in the field?' I could not answer." MacArthur continued, "Some may say: to avoid spread of the conflict into an all-out war with China; others, to avoid Soviet intervention." The general rejected this reasoning, however. "Neither explanation seems valid," he announced. China was already fighting an all-out war and the

⁷⁷ Transcript of General Douglas MacArthur's Address to Congress, April 19, 1951; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

⁷⁸ Transcript of General Douglas MacArthur's Address to Congress, April 19, 1951; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

Soviets would not hesitate or constrain their efforts just because the U.S. was limiting theirs. Critics contended that, by limiting the war, the U.S. could avoid a bigger and worse war, but MacArthur claimed that a limited war would do just the opposite. In fact, MacArthur suggested that *he* was the one avoiding a larger war by trying to win and end the conflict decisively and swiftly while his opponents were risking a wider, longer, and more costly war by appeasing communist aggression and hindering themselves from fighting with all their powers.⁷⁹

Limited war was also immoral because it was unjust and unchivalrous to the Korean people and to American soldiers. MacArthur pointed out that limiting the war had destroyed Korea. By confining the war to the peninsula, he asserted, the U.S. had not saved but sentenced Korea “to suffer the devastating impact of full naval and air bombardment while the enemy’s sanctuaries are fully protected from such attack and devastation.” That seemed unfair to the one nation, of all the nations in the world, that had “risked its all against communism.” Similarly, limited war also sacrificed, instead of saved, American lives. MacArthur told Congress that their “fighting sons in Korea” were “splendid in every way” and that everything had had done or proposed was intended “to preserve them and end this savage conflict honorably and with the least loss of time and a minimum sacrifice of life.” The blood shed in Korea had caused him “the deepest anguish and anxiety” and MacArthur implicitly condemned the President and his policies for risking American lives unnecessarily. The general then closed his address with a famous peroration recalling an old barracks ballad – “old soldiers never die; they just fade away” – and the old soldier bid farewell claiming that he had just done his best to do his duty.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Transcript of General Douglas MacArthur's Address to Congress, April 19, 1951; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

⁸⁰ Transcript of General Douglas MacArthur's Address to Congress, April 19, 1951; PSF, The Korean War and Its Origins, HSTPL.

When MacArthur finished his speech, Rovere and Schelsinger wrote, the hero-worship turned into full idolatry. Dewey Short (R-MO), the ranking Republican member of the House Armed Services Committee and a Rhodes Scholar “went off the deep end.” After MacArthur’s oration, Short proclaimed, “We heard God speak here today, God in the flesh, the voice of God.” Later that day, when MacArthur showed up late for another devotional, a Washington correspondent apparently commented, perhaps without even irreverence, that “difficulties must have been encountered in getting him unnailed from the cross.” Two days later, MacArthur received the largest ticker-tape parade in New York’s history to that point. An estimated 7.5 million people turned out to see MacArthur drive through the “Canyon of Heroes” and threw 2,852 tons of paper – nearly 1,700 miles – of ticker tape.⁸¹

Senate Hearings

With a popular, defiant, war-hero who had been recently martyred by a terminally unpopular president in the midst of a stalemated war, public outrage reached a boiling point. To handle and diffuse the explosive political situation, Senators Richard Russell (D-GA) and Tom Connally (D-TX) arranged for a series of joint hearings of the committees they chaired to investigate the dismissal of General MacArthur.⁸² Beginning on May 3, the Armed Services Committee and the Foreign Relations Committee listened to MacArthur before hearing from officials from the White House and the Pentagon. Overall, MacArthur blamed Truman and Acheson for denying him victory in Korea and defended unlimited war but undermined many of his points with unsatisfactory and contradictory responses. MacArthur’s case was thoroughly dismantled, however, when the JCS

⁸¹ “The Heartiest Welcome Ever,” *Life* 30, no. 18 (April 30, 1951): 30-31; Rovere and Schlesinger, *The General and the President*, 9-11, 15-16.

⁸² The hearings and their history were also bedeviled by partisanship. Democrats, not wanting to give MacArthur another public microphone with which to denounce the administration, insisted on closed sessions because of the sensitive political and military matters under investigation. The press and the public only received censored transcripts until more information was unsealed in 1973.

revealed their disagreements with him and upheld limited war and President's decision to relieve MacArthur. After seven weeks of testimony, the public lost interest in the drama and their taste for unlimited war.

MacArthur testified before the joint committees for three days and Senators seemed dazzled by the general and treated him deferentially. He tried keenly to present the crisis as a split between the military and the politicians so when the first question asked whether MacArthur and the JCS had disagreed, the general claimed that he had a good relationship with the JCS and denied any disagreements. In fact, he insisted that the Chiefs' views and his own were "practically identical."⁸³ He confessed zero errors of judgment or action and repeated the decisive strategies that he had proposed and blamed Truman and Acheson for disallowing victory in Korea. MacArthur also asserted that he and the government were divided against one another because he advanced a policy and Washington had none, the differences between them were not differences *over* policy. The hearings soon revealed, however, that the gulf between MacArthur and Washington ran long and deep and involved fundamentally different values, assumptions, and visions about American grand strategy in Asia.⁸⁴

Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AR) uncovered the heart of the discord when he asked MacArthur whether communism or the Soviet Union was the real enemy. In response, the general juxtaposed containment and counterforce and defended the latter passionately. As he had told Congress, MacArthur stated that he hated war, but he argued that, when challenged, the United States had to respond "with unconditional vigor to that challenge" and use overwhelming or

⁸³ United States Congress, Senate Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Relations, *Military Situation in the Far East*, Hearings, 82nd Congress, 1st Session, Part 1 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1951), 13.

⁸⁴ Rovere and Schlesinger, *The General and the President and the Future of American Foreign Policy*, 186-187, 189-190.

disproportionate force. It could not allow itself “to be constrained by too close a calculation of the countermoves of the enemy.” By using overwhelming counterforce, MacArthur claimed that he had been waging a preventive war, protecting the United States and the world from a third world war by defeating communist aggression in Korea. Truman found that intolerable because he presumed that counterforce would lead to a world war while containment would preclude it. But what MacArthur could not tolerate was self-restraint. There was no such thing as limited or half-war, he insisted. That was just appeasement which to MacArthur bordered on treason or blasphemy – it was immoral. Force had to met with maximum counterforce. If counterforce brought the Soviet Union into the war, so be it.⁸⁵

In this case, however, among others, MacArthur’s witness contradicted his own views and statements about war. As Rovere and Schlesinger pointed out, the logical extension of counterforce would have been immoral, impossible, and perhaps irrational. They explained, “If communism everywhere was the enemy, and if there were no substitute for victory, then the logical conclusion must be that victory could not be achieved until communism everywhere had been eradicated.” The first aim of containment, they argued, was not victory in war, but to contain communism without war.⁸⁶

MacArthur was right, therefore, in suggesting that containment was a new way of war. It amounted to a revolution in U.S. foreign policy that required new values, convictions, and ethics such as patience, firmness, and steadiness as well as new policies and strategies like limited war, coalitions, and the concentration of force at the most critical point. By challenging limited war, MacArthur challenged those new values, attitudes, and ethics.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Rovere and Schlesinger, *The General and the President and the Future of American Foreign Policy*, 189, 224-226.

⁸⁶ Rovere and Schlesinger, 226, 236.

⁸⁷ Rovere and Schlesinger, 237.

In effect, MacArthur practiced total global containment and wanted to resist communism wherever it popped up, while the Truman administration practiced selective containment and assigned priority efforts to Europe instead of Asia. Accordingly, the general saw communism, not the USSR, as the essential enemy, he denied the priority of Europe, and associated restraint with appeasement. He also rejected the need for allies. Rather than working with or through the United Nations, MacArthur argued that the United States should take action unilaterally if necessary.⁸⁸

But containment did not reject counterforce, only maximum force. It required limited war for limited objectives, rather than maximum, total, unlimited war for objectives without substitute. As the Truman Doctrine had proclaimed, the objective of containment was not to destroy communism or the USSR in another ideological crusade in the way that World War II had destroyed German Nazism and Japanese militarism. The goal of containment was to punish individual cases of aggression.⁸⁹

To that extent though, MacArthur was also correct that containment substituted punitive action for victory. Limited war was not a plan for victory over communism which would have been intolerably costly to the point of impossibility, it was a plan for co-existence with communism and some Americans simply could not accept that. For them, containment and limited war without victory were more intolerable than the horrific costs of a victorious unlimited war.

Both sides believed the results in Korea justified their policies. For MacArthur and his disciples, stalemate justified unlimited war and proved that the U.S. needed to escalate and expand the conflict in order to win decisively since limited war had not been successful and threatened to mire the U.S. and Korea in an indecisive forever war. For Truman and his acolytes, the limited

⁸⁸ Rovere and Schlesinger, 220-221, 237, 247.

⁸⁹ Rovere and Schlesinger, 238.

American casualties justified limited war and proved that the U.S. needed to keep the war localized and constrained in order to avoid a wider, general, world or nuclear war that would prove immoral to fight if not impossible to win.⁹⁰

Secretary of Defense George Marshall and the Joint Chiefs of Staff testified next and confirmed that they had no disagreements with the White House, but they revealed that their views were not “identical” to MacArthur’s. Indeed, Marshall, General Omar Bradley, General Hoyt Vandenberg, General J. Lawton Collins, and Admiral Forrest Sherman each disagreed with MacArthur and contradicted many of his statements.⁹¹ Marshall worried that MacArthur’s program for unlimited war would expand the war with China, lose American allies, cost American lives, and risk a world war with the Soviet Union. Vandenberg indicated that the Air Force did not have the capability to carry out MacArthur’s envisioned bombing campaign with its “shoestring air force.” Bradley pointed out that China was limiting its operations too since it had not attacked UN airbases or ports, and had not expanded the war to attack America’s own privileged “sanctuary” in Japan.⁹² Overall, the JCS advised that the U.S. should not escalate or expand the Korean War because it was not worth the cost although they affirmed their willingness to do so if the communists enlarged the war.

Bradley, most of all, nailed MacArthur’s military coffin shut when he contended that MacArthur’s insubordination threatened the principle of civilian control over the military and that his plans for unlimited war were flawed, erroneous, and immoral. On May 15, he explained why the JCS had substituted limited war for unlimited war:

⁹⁰ Rovere and Schlesinger, 245.

⁹¹ Rovere and Schlesinger, 190.

⁹² United States Congress, Senate Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Relations, *Military Situation in the Far East, Hearings, 82nd Congress, 1st Session, Part 2* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1951), 751, 1379.

I am under no illusion that our present strategy of using means short of total war to achieve our ends and oppose communism is a guarantee that a world war will not be thrust upon us. But a policy of patience and determination without provoking a world war, while we improve our military power, is one which we believe we must continue to follow.

The strategic alternative, enlargement of the war in Korea to include Red China, would probably delight the Kremlin more than anything else we could do. It would necessarily tie down additional forces, especially our sea power and our air power, while the Soviet Union would not be obliged to put a single man into the conflict.

Under present circumstances, we have recommended against enlarging the war from Korea to also include Red China.

“Frankly,” Bradley concluded, “in the opinion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, this strategy would involve us in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong enemy.”⁹³

By the time the hearings concluded, the drama over MacArthur’s dismissal had died down and the Korean War had settled into a war of attrition along the waist of the peninsula. MacArthur faded away. He was never able to grasp that “his program had been rejected by military men on military grounds, not just by political men on political grounds,” Rovere and Schlesinger wrote. “He seems to have become possessed by the idea that he was a victim of the egregious folly of statesmen.”⁹⁴ His passing would seem to mark the end of his military ideals as well. The Senate investigation largely discredited MacArthur and his proposals and most analyses of the hearings concluded that MacArthur was wrong, and that unlimited war was too, just like General Bradley had stated. Americans came away from the hearings more convinced that unlimited war was impossible and immoral. But the Joint Chiefs’ testimony did not quarrel with MacArthur’s theories of war, just his application. Bradley emphasized that an unlimited war in Korea was likely to bring in the Soviet Union and exact too many casualties on all sides – it was the wrong place and the wrong time for

⁹³ United States Congress, Senate Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Relations, *Military Situation in the Far East*, 731-732.

⁹⁴ Rovere and Schlesinger, *The General and the President and the Future of American Foreign Policy*, 165.

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such a war. That did not mean that unlimited war should or would be consigned to the historical dustbin.

Stalemate and Armistice

FROM UNLIMITED TO LIMITED WAR

The Senate hearings about MacArthur's dismissal largely marked the end of the debate over limited or unlimited war and the United States shifted permanently from fighting for victory to fighting to maintain the status quo. Many U.S. commanders still struggled with the decision to constrain the war effort and fight for a negotiated peace, rather than decisive victory over the communists. World War II veterans, in particular, wanted to fight and win the Korean War the way they had fought and won against Japan and Germany. By May 1951, however, the Truman administration had adjusted its goals and strategies. As the MacArthur hearings had showed, the administration did not want an enlarged war with China or the USSR and so the U.S. aimed to restore the status quo antebellum and seek a diplomatic end to the war. In other words, once MacArthur was gone, the United States fought for peace with honor. These more limited objectives required a limited war to maintain a strong defensive line that UN forces could hold and not bargain away while avoiding a wider conflict. Accordingly, Acheson and the State Department focused on preserving the anti-communist coalition and avoiding an enlarged war while the JCS focused on holding the line in Korea and defending Japan against Soviet incursions.¹

More and more, Washington believed that military operations would not solve the situation in Korea. On May 17, for example, Truman approved NSC 48/5 which repeated that the United States' ultimate aim was a free, unified, and democratic Korea but that the U.S. should primarily use political means to achieve that objective. The U.S. would work through the UN to reach a political settlement that would provide for an armistice, the extension of ROK authority south of the

¹ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 218, 220, 225.

armistice line, the withdrawal of non-Korean forces from the peninsula, and the strengthening of ROK military power to deter and repel any future aggression. In the meantime, the U.S. would work to localize the conflict and not expand the war with China or engage in a general war against the Soviet Union.²

To reach that settlement, the JCS restricted General Ridgway's operations to limit the advance of UN forces and prohibited progress beyond certain lines without permission. Although UN Command might undertake future offensives to strengthen defensive lines for South Korea, they would not attempt again to unify the peninsula. Instead, they intended to use overwhelming firepower to compel the communists to sign a favorable armistice and Ridgway was ordered to inflict maximum losses on the enemy in order to create the conditions for a political settlement. However, it was also imperative that he minimize American casualties since "ground gained in combat might be lost in negotiations." In sum, historian D. Clayton James has noted that "Ridgway's decision-making authority was thus carefully circumscribed so that his army's operations all pointed toward a negotiated settlement on the terms of NSC 48/5."³

Many U.S. commanders struggled with the idea of fighting for a stalemate though and did not like that they were fighting to avoid losing the war, not to win it. In April and May 1951, for instance, when the Chinese Spring offensive resulted in 175,000 communist casualties, General James Van Fleet thought he had turned the tide in Korea. Van Fleet had fought at Utah Beach on D-Day and replaced Ridgway as commander of the U.S. Eighth Army when Ridgway replaced MacArthur as the head of UN Command, and he wanted to pursue decisive victory. UN Command

² James and Wells, 221–22.

³ James and Wells, 221–25.

and the Joint Chiefs of Staff held back, however. They responded with a counteroffensive in June but did not aim to totally defeat Chinese forces.⁴

Truce talks began at Kaesong on July 10, 1951, and some commanders wanted UN forces to pressure communist armies before and during the negotiations. Acheson indicated that the U.S. was ready to talk just as Ridgway's commanders were reporting that Chinese troops were surrendering and that communist forces appeared to be near collapse. The U.S. declined to press its advantages, however. During and after the war, military commanders like MacArthur, Van Fleet, Admiral C. Turner Joy, and others, regretted that the Truman administration decided to fight for peace rather than victory. Their military and strategic convictions, their experiences in World War II, and hindsight after the war had ended all suggested that the United States should have fought for total victory and took advantage of communist weaknesses to win the Korean War. Syngman Rhee wanted victory most of all and was the most dismayed because he still wanted to unify the peninsula and he felt betrayed by the United States' limited efforts.⁵ Some scholars have revived this bitter evidence to argue that the U.S. missed a chance for decisive victory in Korea. But U.S. strategists did not miss victory because they were not aiming for it.

U.S. strategists in the summer of 1951 did not aim for decisive victory in Korea because the United States and the UN coalition that it led did not have the willpower or the manpower to sustain large military offensives after negotiations began. In other words, U.S. strategists abandoned total war and total victory because they believed that total victory was immoral and impossible. General Ridgway concluded that "when all the factors were taken into consideration, it was decided that the political advantage of driving the Chinese back to their lair was not worth the blood it would have cost." D. Clayton James similarly remarks: "If the blood of their young men had to be

⁴ James and Wells, 218–19, 226–27.

⁵ James and Wells, 225, 228–29.

shed further, the American-led alliance members were agreed that it should be for higher global priorities in more strategically valuable areas. Communism had been contained on the Korean peninsula; that was accomplishment enough.”⁶ Clearly, by the summer of 1951, containment had replaced victory as the overriding objective and value for U.S. strategists.

Thus, because of the decisions that the Truman administration made to limit U.S. operations, the Korean War became an entirely different experience than World War II. In Korea, the U.S. fought a limited war to contain communism, restore the status quo antebellum, and achieve peace with honor through an armistice and political settlement. That was an immense change from World War II where the United States waged an unlimited war with an absolute commitment to use overwhelming manpower and material resources to achieve unconditional surrender and total victory. In Korea, just six years later, the U.S. balked at the casualties of a wider war and tried not only to localize the conflict but to restrict it by imposing their own limitations on UN operations.

Indeed, the Truman administration increasingly indicated that a wider war, world war, and nuclear war were just as dangerous to world peace as communist aggression. Speaking at the Statler Hotel in Washington to the Civil Defense Conference on May 7, 1951, Truman talked about the threat of nuclear war. “The threat of atomic warfare is one which we must face, no matter how much we dislike it. We can never afford to forget that the terrible destruction of cities, and of civilization as we know it, is a real possibility,” the President stated. For that reason, the U.S. needed to prevent atomic war, “That is what our foreign policy is all about.”⁷

An atomic attack on the United States would destroy its cities, burn out its centers of production, and incite panic among the people, and Truman acknowledged that there was “no

⁶ James and Wells, 230–31.

⁷ Address at a Dinner of the Civil Defense Conference, May 7, 1951; Public Papers, HSTPL.

complete protection against an atomic bomb attack.” Civil defense organizations could check panic and reduce the number of casualties, but the President insisted that an atomic war would still be intolerable. “Whole cities would be casualties,” he declared. “Cleveland or Chicago, Seattle or New York, Los Angeles or Washington, or any of our other great cities might be destroyed.” Victory in a nuclear war might still be possible, but Truman believed it would be insufferable. He explained, “Even with such losses, frightful as they would be, I think this country would survive and would win an atomic war. But even if we win, an atomic war would be a disaster.”

The best way to avoid atomic attacks and nuclear war, therefore, was to “prevent the outbreak of another world war and to achieve a real peace.” That was what the U.S. was trying to accomplish in Korea. The fighting was long and hard but the U.S. was exacting large numbers of casualties and Truman hoped that Peiping would realize that “aggression does not pay.” The administration had been encouraged to expand and escalate the war in order to end it “speedily” and save American lives but the President insisted that the U.S. had a “better chance of stopping aggression in Korea, at a smaller cost in the lives of our troops and those of our allies, by following the present course.” Truman explained that he had refused to enlarge the conflict because “The best military advice I have been able to obtain” suggested that escalating and expanding the war would likely lead “to a much bigger and much longer war” which would lead to even more casualties. A wider war would expose American soldiers to air and naval attacks, it could endanger Japan and the Philippines, and Truman was determined to avoid it. He announced, “We are determined to do our utmost to limit the war in Korea” and the U.S. would not take any steps that might make it responsible for a general or world war. He repeated:

I am convinced that the course we are now following in Korea is accomplishing the most for peace – and at the least cost in American lives. All of us wish that no Americans had to fight or die. But by fighting on a limited scale now, we may be able to prevent a third world war later on.

Remember this, if we do have another world war, it will be an atomic war. We could expect many atomic bombs to be dropped on American cities, and a single one of them could cause many more times the casualties than we have suffered in all the fighting in Korea. I do not want to be responsible for bringing that about.⁸

Truman thus argued that limited war was the best way to contain communist aggression and contain the Korean conflict and he urged Americans to stay the course in order to save lives and prevent World War III.⁹

The war did not always stay limited, however. On September 11, 1951, Livingston T. Merchant, the acting Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs met several British defense and foreign ministry officials and talked about removing the restrictions against bombing targets on the Yalu River. The U.S. only considered attacking dams and power installations on the Korean side of the border and Merchant reminded the British that the curb on bombing was only self-imposed, there was no formal agreement holding them back. The original limitation had been issued before China's intervention and was meant to avoid such but, now that China was involved, there was no need for the restriction anymore. However, the prohibition against invading Manchurian air space would remain in effect, including for hot pursuit.¹⁰

At other times, despite the efforts to limit the war, restraints sometimes broke down. There were practically no curbs at all on the air war during the summer and fall of 1952. In June, FEAF bombed hydroelectric facilities on the Yalu and launched a campaign against North Korea that bombed every possible military or infrastructure target which resulted in massive flooding. In the largest raid of the war, 1,400 aircraft attacked Pyongyang on August 29. Later, as peace talks progressed, the JCS recommended in May 1953 that if peace talks broke down and the war

⁸ Address at a Dinner of the Civil Defense Conference, May 7, 1951; Public Papers, HSTPL.

⁹ On April 6, 1951, the week before he fired MacArthur, Truman authorized the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to move nine nuclear bombs to the Air Force for possible use in Korea.

¹⁰ Livingston T. Merchant to Dean Acheson, September 11, 1951; Bombing of North Korean Plants, Box 11, KWF, SMOF, HSTPL.

expanded, all necessary means should be utilized including nuclear weapons.¹¹ Overall, though, the United States deliberately restrained its operations and kept the war from escalating and expanding.

Enemy Limits

China and the USSR did the same. Despite bitter claims by MacArthur and other military and Congressional leaders that the United States was unfairly fighting a half-war with one hand tied behind its back while the communists were not pulling any punches, the truth was that both sides constrained their operations and limited the war to keep it from escalating and expanding.¹²

The Soviet Air Force could have provided more aircraft to challenge the U.S. for control of the skies and the Soviet fleet at Vladivostok could have intervened and escalated the war and its costs, but the Soviets chose not to do so in either case. Neither China nor the Soviet Union launched strategic bombing campaigns against Pusan or Inchon when both were vulnerable, and the communists did not deploy submarines or major surface ships. China did not bomb any of the UN's "privileged sanctuaries" either.¹³ Moreover, just as Washington called the war a "police action," to dispel notions that the United States was all-in for all-out war, Peiping called its soldiers "volunteers" to indicate that its regular forces had not been ordered into combat and that China too was not fighting a total war. The U.S. also was not the only one to limit the war's geography. The communists did not expand the war beyond Korea either. With Soviet aid, China could have enlarged and exacerbated the war by expanding combat to Formosa or Indochina, but they did not.¹⁴ To the great dismay of their Korean allies, therefore, the great powers worked separately to restrain their ambitions, limit their military operations, and localize and contain the conflict.

¹¹ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 238, 240.

¹² James and Wells, 242–43.

¹³ Korean Facts, undated; Korea-MacArthur-Foreign Policy, Box 64, Subject File, 1916-1995, GMPEP, HSTPL.

¹⁴ James and Wells, *Refighting the Last War*, 236, 243–44.

KOREA: THE TURNING POINT

After hostilities ended with the armistice in July 1953, everyone but the most die-hard on both sides accepted the stalemate. Both sides claimed victory in a sense, the U.S. had contained communism and saved the ROK while China had preserved the DPRK. For Koreans, however, the war had been a total war and a total disaster. Given the antagonisms between the two Koreas and their sponsors, the temptations to escalate the fighting, and the rewards of total victory, the Korean War could have become – in fact, it should have become – World War III. The fact that it remained contained to the Korean peninsula and never expanded and escalated into a world or nuclear war is one of the miracles of the Cold War. As historian James wrote, “the most remarkable phenomenon of the Korean conflict was the inexplicable communication, neither oral nor written, between implacably hostile camps who signaled restraint to each other.” Without any formal agreement, both sides prevented Korea from becoming World War III. Containment thus cut both ways. James explained:

somehow the remarkable understanding of self-imposed limits held long enough to achieve an armistice, which, however tenuous, kept the Korean peninsula and, indeed, the world from suffering the massive destruction that a refighting of the Second World War portended. The commanders and the tactics, as well as many of the troops and weapons, were largely from the global war of 1941-1945, but thanks mainly to some wise men on both sides who formulated the silent, implicit agreement on limits, the legacy of World War II was abandoned as the world was led uncertainly into a new era of limited and unconventional warfare.¹⁵

U.S. forces already had the commanders, tactics, weapons, and experiences of World War II and could have made Korea a total war of total annihilation for total victory. But they did not. A third world war so soon after the second would have been catastrophic for the post-war world, especially considering that the primary belligerents were armed with nuclear weapons. James gave thanks for the limited war, exclaiming, “a decisive triumph of World War II proportions would have

¹⁵ James and Wells, xii.

guaranteed the eruption of another and more terrible global war. As it was, the silent agreement on limitations worked, but it was a risk of perilous magnitude.”¹⁶

But the Korean War stayed limited and localized not only because of a silent agreement, but because of both unspoken and manifest changes in how American strategists thought about war and its costs. When the Korean War broke out, the Truman administration had established a new doctrine of containment and, despite the temptations and opportunities to enlarge the war, U.S. strategists ultimately rejected unconditional surrender and unlimited war. In their place, they substituted containment, limited war, and peace with honor in order to preserve the status quo antebellum on the one hand and preclude the enormous costs of another world war on the other. Certainly, by the summer of 1951, peace had become more important than victory and saving lives had supplanted unification. These changes and substitutes were not merely strategic responses to military and diplomatic realities but moral choices. The Korean War turned the United States away from its moral and strategic stance of victory at all costs.

In his farewell address in January 1953, Truman recalled his decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan in 1945. “I made that decision in the conviction it would save hundreds of thousands of lives – Japanese as well as American.” The President confessed though that it was not easy to send American boys to Korea either. “I was a soldier in the First World War, and I know what a soldier goes through,” Truman explained, “So I knew what was ahead if we acted in Korea.” But as the war progressed, Truman realized that “the issue was whether there would be fighting in a limited area now or on a much larger scale later on – whether there would be some casualties now or many more casualties later.” He determined that fighting a limited war, now, however frustrating,

¹⁶ James and Wells, 244–45.

indecisive, and even costly, was preferable to a wider, more decisive, but more unlimited war later.

He explained:

Now, once in a while, I get a letter from some impatient person asking, why don't we get it over with? Why don't we issue an ultimatum, make all-out war, drop the atomic bomb?

For most Americans, the answer is quite simple: We are not made that way. We are a moral people. Peace is our goal, with justice and freedom. We cannot, of our own free will, violate the very principles that we are striving to defend. The whole purpose of what we are doing is to prevent world war III. Starting a war is no way to make peace.

But if anyone still thinks that just this once, bad means can bring good ends, then let me remind you of this: We are living in the 8th year of the atomic age. We are not the only nation that is learning to unleash the power of the atom. A third world war might dig the grave not only of our Communist opponents but also of our own society, our world as well as theirs.

Starting an atomic war is totally unthinkable for rational men.¹⁷

With that, Truman exiled unlimited, total, all-out, or preventive war. In the atomic age, the war that had been necessary, just, completely victorious, and worth the price just a few years earlier had become immoral and unthinkable. By 1953, the scales had changed, and Truman judged that unlimited war and nuclear war were too evil to justify whatever good they might accomplish. Victory was no longer worthy of all its costs.

¹⁷ The President's Farewell Address to the American People, January 15, 1953; Public Papers, HSTPL.

Part III. Peace Without Victory: Total Withdrawal and Peace with Honor in the Vietnam War, 1965-1973

In Part Three, I argue that the United States completed a thirty-year strategic and moral reversal in foreign policy and grand strategy – from victory at all costs to peace at any price. By the end of the Vietnam War, the United States fought for peace with honor, rather than unconditional surrender; it sought and achieved a total withdrawal from Vietnam, instead of total victory; it fought a limited war, not an unlimited war; and, desperate to escape the Vietnam quagmire, it submitted to abject defeat in 1973. Indeed, by that time, the United States was willing to do whatever it took to extricate itself from the Vietnam killing fields and end the war, no matter the cost.

After claiming that U.S. forces had been attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorized President Johnson “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression” in Vietnam. The President exercised the mandate by initiating a bombing campaign against North Vietnam in February 1965 and then sent ground troops to South Vietnam in March to contain communist aggression and achieve “peace without conquest.” But even as the Johnson administration escalated American involvement and continued annihilation and attrition strategies, U.S. strategists did not employ “all necessary measures” to achieve their goals in Vietnam. Rather, they limited the war, tried to negotiate an acceptable peace, rejected nuclear weapons and even halted bombing in 1968 (instead of escalating it) to bring Hanoi to the conference table.

For the most part, Americans still rejected withdrawal and appeasement, but the majority no longer thought unconditional surrender, total victory, and unlimited war were profitable or moral.

Even as the Johnson administration outwardly remained as determined as ever, U.S. strategists never planned for total victory and unlimited war. Instead, they orchestrated a limited war for less expansive goals because peace supplanted victory as a war aim. Ultimately, U.S. strategists were not willing to go as far as previous administrations because saving lives and avoiding a wider war became more important than victory. The Johnson administration and the United States thus changed course from peace through victory to victory through peace.

Johnson sent American troops to South Vietnam to repel communist forces which were invading and infiltrating an American ally in East Asia.¹ But although his rhetoric and decisions show that Johnson and his administration chose war, the debates within the White House and Pentagon about sending more soldiers to Vietnam reveal that the determination to escalate was nevertheless a determination to limit the war in Vietnam. Johnson's decision to pursue a moderate path to peace without conquest led to more measured strategies that avoided both total war and total withdrawal. Indeed, the arguments for and against escalation in 1965 all exhibited limited attitudes about the war. There were no calls for total victory, all-out war, or maximum effort; the administration wanted to keep the war contained, geographically and militarily. Once again, containment cut both ways. For the United States, containing communist aggression amounted to negative victory – denying victory to the enemy and seeking peace without victory for themselves. And while U.S. strategists never deceived themselves into thinking that more soldiers would not lead to more casualties, they still focused on limiting their losses, rather than showing a willingness to

¹ For Lyndon Johnson's responsibility for Americanizing the war, see Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). For the lack of an objective and strategy for victory in Vietnam, see H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Stephen Peter Rosen, "Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War," *International Security* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 83-113.

bear the losses necessary to achieve their objectives. In short, even while Johnson and his advisors chose to escalate instead of withdraw, their decisions were conditioned by their fears of a wider and more costly war and they called for more men and more money to accomplish only what was necessary. They enlarged the war, ultimately, to keep it small.

By the end of 1967, there were more than half a million soldiers in Vietnam. On the ground, the Pentagon's attrition strategy had inflicted severe casualties on North Vietnamese forces and reduced the influence of the National Liberation Front (NLF) or Viet Cong in South Vietnam, but it gave the initiative to the enemy who took advantage of the terrain and borders to sap the strength and morale of U.S. forces. In the air, U.S. bombers continued to pulverize North Vietnam in Operation Rolling Thunder to coerce Hanoi into negotiating an end to the war or at least terminating its support for the insurgency in the south. But the campaign did not destroy North Vietnam's capacity or will to fight, or stop the Viet Cong, while causing thousands of collateral casualties. At home, the war continued to tear at the fabric of American society and the anti-war movement gained momentum.

Faced with a quagmire that the United States seemingly could not win nor escape as well as domestic divisions, President Johnson and his advisors reevaluated American strategy and enumerated four options in November 1967: "Pull-out, Pull-back, All-out, Stick-it-out."² Ultimately, most of Johnson's advisors decided to stick it out but, even as the Johnson administration determined to stay the course at the end of 1967, their debates about U.S. strategy showed that U.S. officials valued victory less, had less tolerance for the human costs of war, and less will to win

² Memo, Maxwell D. Taylor to the President, 3 November 1967, #19, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

because they thought total victory was impossible in Vietnam, because they feared a wider war with greater casualties, and they did not want to aggravate public dissent against the war.

By 1968, most Americans believed that the Vietnam War was a mistake and thought the United States should get out of Indochina. Johnson reached the same conclusion after the Tet Offensive and refused to run for re-election and spent his final year in office trying to extricate the United States from Vietnam. He nearly achieved a peace settlement as U.S. diplomats tried to negotiate an end to the war, but their efforts were undermined and ultimately co-opted by the Nixon administration.

Richard Nixon entered the White House in January 1969 determined to end America's involvement in the Vietnam War while still preserving South Vietnam's sovereignty and self-determination in hopes of establishing a lasting peace in Indochina, the Pacific, and the world. To achieve what he called "peace with honor," Nixon claimed that the United States was willing "to take every reasonable step" to end the war in Vietnam.³ His administration, therefore, applied a series of military and diplomatic strategies that became known as the Nixon Doctrine. On the diplomatic front, U.S. strategists negotiated with North Vietnam in Paris, openly and in secret, to establish honorable peace terms at the conference table. In the meantime, U.S. forces continued to wage a limited war against NVA and NLF forces in South Vietnam while bombing and rattling their nuclear sabers in North Vietnam through a strategy known as Madman Diplomacy. Fighting in the South aimed to contain communist aggression and convince North Vietnam that the U.S. could not be defeated while strategic bombing and nuclear threats tried to coerce Hanoi to make concessions at the conference table. In the event though, that the United States could not make an honorable peace through negotiations, the Nixon administration planned to establish acceptable conditions on

³ Richard Nixon, "Address Before the 24th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations," September 18, 1969, APP.

the ground through Vietnamization. While the Johnson administration had escalated and “Americanized” the Vietnam War by sending more men, money, and materiel to South Vietnam, the Nixon administration planned to de-escalate and “Vietnamize” the war by gradually withdrawing American soldiers and training and equipping South Vietnamese soldiers to take their place. This way, the United States could leave Vietnam and end its commitment there even if it could not establish a peace agreement or an acceptable political solution for the Vietnam problem.

Vietnamization thus provided a way for the United States to maximize its objectives while minimizing its costs and, in that sense, it became another silver bullet for the Nixon administration which hoped to be able to achieve all of its goals without prolonging or exacerbating the war. The strategy did not change the moral dimensions of the war, however. Indeed, Vietnamization merely transferred the burden of killing and dying to South Vietnam. Gradually, though, the Nixon Doctrine withdrew the majority of American soldiers, and led to discussions about peace plans that the Nixon administration proposed in 1970 and 1972. Nevertheless, U.S. strategists questioned whether the doctrine was working in the face of Hanoi’s intransigence. After North Vietnam launched its Easter Offensive in the spring of 1972, Nixon and Kissinger responded with a strategic bombing, mining, and blockade program against Hanoi, Haiphong harbor, and other cities in North Vietnam. Despite the moral outcry, the administration justified the campaign because it aimed to force concessions from Hanoi and lead to peace with honor.

In August 1972, North Vietnam seemed to soften its approach in Paris and in October, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho reached an informal agreement to end the war. Buoyed by the prospects for peace and the announcement of a diplomatic breakthrough just before the presidential election, Nixon won a landslide victory over George McGovern and claimed to have secured a domestic mandate for peace. Armed with his mandate, Nixon proposed new terms which South Vietnamese

President Nguyen Van Thieu and Le Duc Tho both resisted. At an impasse, the United States pressured Saigon by threatening to negotiate alone and pressured Hanoi by launching the largest bombing campaign since World War II. The Nixon administration justified each of its strategies by claiming that they would lead to a more honorable and moral peace and, in January 1973, North Vietnam returned to the conference table and South Vietnam acceded to American demands. Kissinger and Tho soon reached an agreement to end the war and Nixon triumphantly announced on January 23 that the United States had won peace with honor.

Nixon and his advisors insisted, thereafter, that the United States had “won” an honorable peace in Vietnam because the Paris Peace Accords had ended the war throughout Indochina, released American prisoners of war and allowed U.S. troops to withdraw while preserving South Vietnam’s self-determination. The Nixon administration lauded the peace agreement because it had preserved American credibility, contained communism, ended the war quickly while saving American lives, and offered the chance for lasting world peace. In the end, Nixon and his administration lauded peace with honor as justified and moral because it made the Vietnam War worth the cost.

Despite Nixon’s insistence on peace with honor, the peace agreement only provided terms sufficiently acceptable for the United States to wash its hands of Vietnam. The arbitrary talks had infringed on South Vietnam’s sovereignty and, although Nixon and Kissinger promised to continue their economic support for Saigon and held out the chance that U.S. forces could return if North Vietnam violated the agreement (as expected), everyone privately assumed that American soldiers were gone for good. U.S. strategists thus regarded the peace settlement as a temporary agreement, rather than a permanent solution to the Vietnam problem and the final terms reflected American and North Vietnamese objectives and virtually sidelined South Vietnam. Peace with honor really just

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allowed the United States to save face as it left Vietnam and revealed that the Americans were willing to have peace at any price.

Peace Without Conquest

On April 7, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson left the White House at 8:20 PM and, after a little more than twenty minutes of flying, touched down on the soccer field helipad at Johns Hopkins University. The President proceeded to Shriver Hall and entered from the back so he would not be exposed to protests. Approximately fifty yards from the front of the hall, the Secret Service had designated a picket area where the Women's League for Peace (WLP) planned a protest march, and A Sound Nuclear Policy (SNP) held a prayer vigil. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had also gathered for an anti-war rally although the SDS leader agreed to picket only in the designated area and would not start the rally until after the President's speech.¹ Inside, the President waited in a private lounge for nearly fifteen minutes and then walked up one flight of stairs and stood in the wings until he was introduced and welcomed to the auditorium stage by Charles Garland, one of the university trustees. Dressed in a business suit, Johnson first greeted the university and Congressional dignitaries in attendance, and then the faculty of "John Hopkins" University instead of *Johns* Hopkins, before launching into a major address on the Vietnam War known as "Peace without Conquest."²

In his speech, Johnson effectively committed the United States to pursue peace without victory. In doing so, he showed how the country had transitioned from peace through victory in World War II to victory through peace in Vietnam. While extreme hawks and doves on the right and left criticized Johnson's speech and policy for not going far enough or for going too far, Congress,

¹ Pickets – Johns Hopkins University – April 7, 1965, "TR 55 Johns Hopkins Univ. Baltimore, Md. 4/7/65," Box 20, Subject File Trips, WHCF, LBJPL.

² Proposed Itinerary – Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore – April 7, 1965, "TR 55 Johns Hopkins Univ. Baltimore, Md. 4/7/65," Box 20, Subject File Trips, WHCF, LBJPL.

the press, and public opinion largely praised the President for his moderate approach to the Vietnam problem and accepted peace without conquest.

At Johns Hopkins, the President first explained why the United States was fighting in Vietnam and what the U.S. was fighting for. He acknowledged that the usual reasons for going to war seemed absent from Vietnam. First of all, Vietnam was far away. The U.S. had no territory to defend there and did not seek any territory in Vietnam. The President explained, however, that the United States was fighting for ideals. By fighting for freedom and security, Americans in the jungles of Southeast Asia were fighting for the same principles as their ancestors who had fought “in the valleys of Pennsylvania.” More broadly, Johnson claimed the U.S. was fighting for a new world “where every country can shape its own destiny.” That new world was the only one in which America’s own freedom would be secure. Johnson admitted that a free world would “never be built by bombs or bullets,” but he maintained that war was often necessary to establish peace and that the United States had to “deal with the world as it is, if it is ever to be as we wish.”³

Even though fighting in Vietnam seemed unrelated to American interests, Johnson argued that the United States had a moral obligation to defend South Vietnam from North Vietnam’s attempt at “total conquest.” The President insisted, “we have a promise to keep.” For more than a decade, the United States had made “a national pledge to help South Vietnam defend its independence” and Johnson intended “to keep that promise.” To dishonor their pledge and abandon South Vietnam to its enemies “would be an unforgivable wrong,” he declared.

American allies, partners, and friends around the world were also counting on the United States, Johnson explained. Abandoning South Vietnam would shake their confidence in America’s commitments and could lead to more widespread unrest, instability, and war. According to this

³ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address at Johns Hopkins University: ‘Peace Without Conquest,’” 7 April 1965, APP.

psychological domino theory, the United States had to stand up to aggression everywhere. If the U.S. did not stand up for South Vietnam, American enemies would be emboldened to test America's commitments in other, even more important locations, like Berlin. By upholding their promise to South Vietnam, the United States was potentially preventing another world war. For that reason, Johnson maintained that the U.S. could not just walk away from Vietnam because that would lead to more violence, not less. The President explained, "The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied." Retreat would not save the United States from fighting; Americans would simply have to prepare for another battle elsewhere. Therefore, the only way to stop aggression was to resist it immediately. World War II had established America's responsibility to resist aggression and defend freedom in Europe and Asia and Johnson called on the country to contain communism in Southeast Asia, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further," the President quoted from the biblical Book of Job.

Despite the high stakes in Vietnam – the freedom of Southeast Asia, the security of the United States, and the world order – Johnson insisted that the U.S. had limited goals in Vietnam. The U.S. only sought the freedom and independence of South Vietnam, he announced. Johnson called it "peace without conquest." To keep South Vietnam free and independent, the President announced that the U.S. would do "everything necessary" to reach its objectives but would "do only what is absolutely necessary." Thus, as North Vietnam and the Viet Cong had increased their attacks, the United States had increased their defense of South Vietnam and the bombing of North Vietnam. And, like his predecessors, President Johnson vowed that the United States had the will and fortitude to achieve its goals. He declared, "We will not be defeated. We will not grow tired. We will not withdraw, either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement." Knowing that peace might not come quickly, Johnson explained that the United States would have to have "patience as well as bravery, the will to endure as well as the will to resist." But the President

remained confident of final success because America's will to win was matched by its capacity to win. "Armed hostility is futile," he announced, because "Our resources are equal to any challenge. Because we fight for values and we fight for principles, rather than territory or colonies, our patience and our determination are unending."

At the same time, Johnson announced that the United States remained ready to conduct "unconditional discussions" to negotiate a peaceful end to the war and he asked Congress to invest \$1 billion to develop Vietnamese society. Together with the United Nations and other international contributors, the United States would provide food, clothing, schools, medicine, and infrastructure throughout Vietnam. In short, Johnson proposed nothing less than an international Great Society to uplift Southeast Asia. Johnson concluded by quoting from Deuteronomy: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." The world could choose, the President said, whether to "destroy or build, kill or aid, hate or understand." The United States chose life over death and, by doing so, Johnson proclaimed, would "prevail over the enemies within man, and over the natural enemies of all mankind."⁴

Johnson's speech received widespread acclaim. Fred Abramson and Ed Morse from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies corrected the President ("It is Johns Hopkins") but thought the address was wonderful otherwise.⁵ Former ambassador John C. Wiley called Johnson's speech the "best American diplomacy since Benjamin Franklin."⁶ The President stood on "solid middle ground," said Senator Edmund Edmondson (D-OK), and Congress generally

⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Address at Johns Hopkins University: 'Peace Without Conquest,'" 7 April 1965, APP.

⁵ Fred Abramson and Ed Morse to the President, 9 April 1965, "Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/A," Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁶ John C. Wiley to the President, 9 April 1965, "Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam)," Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

approved of Johnson's dedication to unconditional discussions on the one hand and his commitment to South Vietnam on the other.⁷ In the Senate, Frank Church (D-ID) said the unqualified approach to talks risked nothing and gained much and Ted Moss (D-UT) appreciated that the U.S. had offered to do everything possible to end hostilities without sacrificing South Vietnam's freedom and independence. John Tower (R-TX) liked that the speech presented an olive branch as well as a sword – a glint of iron with the velvet, George Smathers (D-FL) called it – since unconditional discussions did not mean unconditional settlement, unconditional peace, or unconditional surrender.⁸ In the House, Clement Zablocki (D-WI) likewise commended Johnson's restatement of American policy that offered unconditional discussions without unconditional appeasement or peace with desertion as Nathaniel Craley Jr. (D-PA) labeled it.⁹

The American press also widely praised “peace without conquest” for walking a moderate tightrope between doves and hawks. The President satisfied doves who had been calling for negotiations as well as hawks who wanted the U.S. to maintain pressure until the communists were willing to come to the conference table. The *Dallas Morning News* called the speech a “skillful blend of the carrot and the stick” that combined “sweet talk” and “strong action.”¹⁰ The *Detroit News* said the message was “both magnanimous and shrewd... worthy of those Americans who gave their lives in its cause, and one that reasonable men everywhere have been waiting for.”¹¹ Washington columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote that Johnson had “deftly disarmed his anti-war

⁷ The President to Clement J. Zablocki, 9 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁸ Senate Reactions to LBJ Speech, undated, #2c, “Gordon Chase – Miscellaneous, Vol. 4,” Box 9, FGC, NSF, LBJPL.

⁹ House Reactions to LBJ Speech, undated, #2d, “Gordon Chase – Miscellaneous, Vol. 4,” Box 9, FGC, NSF, LBJPL; Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 10 April 1965, #2b, “Gordon Chase – Miscellaneous, Vol. 4,” Box 9, FGC, NSF, LBJPL.

¹⁰ “The Johnson Touch,” *Dallas Morning News*, 9 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL; “LBJ's Dividends,” *Dallas Morning News*, 21 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

¹¹ Memo, Wayne Phillips to George Reedy, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

critics without really changing his hard line or alienating the hard-liners.”¹² Meanwhile, the *Wall Street Journal* thought the President had restored “a certain amount of Machiavellianism to American diplomacy” although on television it came out “disarmingly innocent.”¹³

The American public applauded the speech as well for the hope Johnson offered for peace. The historian Henry Steele Commager told the President that the policy of unconditional discussions “fills the whole world with hope.”¹⁴ Sydney Berger in Evansville, Indiana, likewise thought unconditional discussions offered hope “to all Americans who grieve over the loss of American lives and the brutality of the campaign in Viet Nam.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, in Paterson, New Jersey, Americo Alexander wrote that the speech raised hopes that “large scale war may yet be avoided,” but he pointed out that the U.S. was still killing people and urged the government to adopt a ceasefire.¹⁶

Outside the United States, the free world mostly liked Johnson’s speech as well. Foreign editors claimed “unconditional discussions” marked a turning point in U.S. policy and hoped that the speech had created a “new climate” in which negotiations could bear fruit. More broadly, international presses appreciated that Washington was committed to a political solution in Vietnam and that the Johnson administration showed flexibility on the issue of war. For those who worried

¹² DOS, “American Opinion Summary,” 15 April 1965, #10a, “Johns Hopkins Speech Reactions,” Box 194, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

¹³ Memo, Wayne Phillips to George Reedy, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

¹⁴ Henry Steele Commager to the President, 8 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

¹⁵ Sydney L. Berger to the President, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

¹⁶ Americo V. Alexander to the President, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/A,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

that the conflict was on the verge of expanding and escalating, the speech tempered their fears with evidence that the U.S. was actively seeking peaceful solutions.¹⁷

PEACE WITHOUT VICTORY

Many editorials pointed to Johnson's declaration that "we will not be defeated..." as a sign of America's unwavering will and commitment to achieving its goals in Vietnam. That statement could hardly be interpreted as a sign of weakness, the *Washington Post* noted, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote that Johnson's declaration formed "a well-deserved rebuke of those who clamor for negotiations on any terms."¹⁸ The *Boston Globe* said Johnson had "answered those who mistakenly imagine... that the world is made up of brotherly love, which it isn't."¹⁹ Overall, American newspapers thought that Johnson's speech showed that the United States was as determined as ever to withstand aggression and achieve its goals in Vietnam. As the *Dallas Morning News* observed, unconditional discussions had drawn headlines and applause around the world but "Less well-noticed is the statement that the U.S. will settle for nothing less than 'an independent South Viet Nam.'" In other words, the newspaper wrote, the U.S. wanted a South Vietnam free from communist domination – the primary U.S. aim from the beginning.²⁰ The *Chicago American* praised Johnson's "stonewall policy" which showed the communists that the U.S. was "prepared to stay in Vietnam as long as necessary, and inflict as much damage on them as necessary." Washington columnist Roscoe Drummond said the speech did not contain "the merest flicker of appeasement" while the *Atlanta Journal* remarked, "There is no question of a pullout from Vietnam or a sellout

¹⁷ Research and Reference Service, "Foreign Reaction to President Johnson's Johns Hopkins Speech on Viet-Nam," 14 April 1965, #3, "Johns Hopkins Speech Reactions," Box 194, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

¹⁸ Department of State, "American Opinion Summary," 9 April 1965, #12, "Johns Hopkins Speech Reactions," Box 194, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

¹⁹ Clifton C. Carter to Marvin Watson, 8 April 1965, "Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con," Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

²⁰ "The Johnson Touch," *Dallas Morning News*, 9 April 1965, "Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65," Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

there as long as Lyndon Johnson is President.” The *Philadelphia Bulletin* concluded: “Through the unusual combination of righteousness, homespun philosophy and dreams” Johnson had pledged the United States to hold the line in Southeast Asia, no matter the cost.²¹ But just because Johnson did not practice appeasement, withdraw U.S. troops, or sellout South Vietnam, that did not mean that the country’s valuation of victory, tolerance for the human costs of war, and will to win had not changed.

By defining an acceptable peace as one that included an independent South Vietnam, Johnson showed that he was not giving in to communist aggression but, as most newspapers observed, his speech split the difference between hawks and doves and landed somewhere between unconditional surrender and appeasement.²² But Johnson did not need to acquiesce or appease North Vietnam to invert American policy because he confirmed that the United States did not seek military victory in Vietnam. Indeed, “peace without conquest” effectively meant peace without victory. The President did not call for total victory in Southeast Asia and he did not demand the unconditional surrender of the Viet Cong or of North Vietnam.²³ In fact, he pointed out that it was Hanoi that was after wrongful conquest, not the United States. Instead, he announced that the U.S. would conduct unconditional discussions. Peace without conquest thus amounted to a reversal in American foreign policy – from peace through victory in World War II to peace without victory in Vietnam.

²¹ Department of State, “American Opinion Summary,” 15 April 1965, #10a, “Johns Hopkins Speech Reactions,” Box 194, VCF, NSF, LBJPL; Memo, Wayne Phillips to George Reedy, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

²² The President to Clement J. Zablocki, 9 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

²³ Johnson did not call for appeasement and total withdrawal either, but it was his refutation of unconditional surrender and total victory that marked the U-turn in U.S. policy.

Naturally, though, Johnson's moderate plans for unconditional discussions and limited war did not please die-hard hawks or doves and the *New York Post* warned that the speech would "satisfy neither those who are clamoring for a climactic showdown with Communist China nor those who urge unilateral U.S. retreat."²⁴ Ultimately, Americans who insisted on victory or peace at any price were disappointed. Hawks insisted that victory was the most important object in the war, and they thought that the Johnson administration lacked the will and stomach to preserve U.S. national security and the free world. Doves, meanwhile, thought peace was more important than victory and they called on the President to stop bombing North Vietnam and combat operations in South Vietnam in order to save American and Asian lives and avoid a wider war.

Hawks, Republicans, and others who demanded victory in Vietnam correctly surmised that Johnson's speech showed that the administration was not willing to do whatever it took to win, and they condemned the President's spinelessness. Howard "Bo" Callaway (R-GA), one of the leading hawks in the House, thought the Johns Hopkins speech effectively established the United States as a "Paper tiger." Overnight, he claimed, the Johnson administration had reversed American policy from firmness based on strength to buying friends based on weakness and he thought it showed American patience and determination had run out.²⁵ Other Republicans similarly worried that Johnson's olive branch would be misconstrued as a sign of America's weakening will. Senator Bourke Hickenlooper (R-IA) thought "unconditional discussions" needed to be amplified and Senator Everett Dirksen (R-IL) asked "Is this another case where the American trumpets sound retreat?"²⁶ In the *New York Herald Tribune*, David Lawrence criticized the shift from victory to peace.

²⁴ Memo, Wayne Phillips to George Reedy, 8 April 1965, "Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65," Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

²⁵ House Reactions to LBJ Speech, undated, #2d, "Gordon Chase – Miscellaneous, Vol. 4," Box 9, FGC, NSF, LBJPL.

²⁶ DOS, "American Opinion Summary," 9 April 1965, #12, "Johns Hopkins Speech Reactions," Box 194, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

He explained, “when a nation is at war, it doesn’t tell its adversary what weapons it intends to use, what areas it plans to attack or exactly how long it intends to continue the fight.” In World War II, he reminded readers, Roosevelt and the Allies insisted on the complete defeat of the enemy before negotiations would begin. Lawrence acknowledged that American lives should not be sacrificed in vain but if peace talks were initiated at the wrong time it would look like the U.S. was giving up the fight. Talking about peace at any price would only encourage the communists. In other words, victory had to come first – victory would precede and lead to peace.²⁷

Asian allies also worried about America’s apparently declining will to win. In Taipei, Senator Thomas J. Dodd (D-CT) reported that South Korean Prime Minister Chung Il-Kwon and Taiwan’s President, Chiang Kai-Shek, both expressed concerns about Johnson’s speech while the press in Taipei repeatedly asked Dodd if unconditional discussions signified “a weakening of American policy or a readiness to retreat.”²⁸ Some had even worried that the U.S. was preparing to withdraw from Vietnam. Dodd tried to assure the audience in Taipei, however, that President Johnson did not know the meaning of “quit” or “surrender” and that Johnson’s speech “marks no new departure and no softening of American policy.”²⁹

Hard-liners at home thanked the President for standing firm against communism in Indochina and against pacifism and appeasement at home. Grace Bancroft from New Bedford, Massachusetts, told Johnson that she had feared he was going “to weaken and give in, to the

²⁷ David Lawrence, “Poor Time to Talk Peace,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

²⁸ Thomas J. Dodd to the President, 11 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

²⁹ “Statement by Senator Thomas J. Dodd (Democrat, Connecticut) Before Gathering in Taipei City Hall Auditorium,” Press Release, PR-65-187, USIS Taipei, 10 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

pacifists who would rather be red than dead.³⁰ Helen Ashworth of Heuvelton, New York, was likewise glad that Johnson had not been swayed by the pressures for “peace at any price.” If the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam, it would have to confront the communists in South Korea, Formosa, Japan, or the Philippines, she claimed; and if the U.S. continued to back down, the communists would attack North America.³¹ In Phoenix, Arizona, a Methodist minister (and a Republican), A. B. Buzzell, felt the same way. He related to Johnson how he had declined to protest air strikes against North Vietnam with other clergyman because he argued that communist aggression had to be stopped. If the U.S. did not contain communism in Vietnam, he wrote, “the day might soon come that we would have to do it on our own shores.”³² Meanwhile, O. M. Bratrud from Kensett, Iowa, was tired of “giving in to the subversive elements” at home and abroad. In his mind, “We gave them China except a little island. We compromised with them on Korea & so on & so on. Our way of handling the Cuban situation was a crime against the Cuban people & a deception against our citizenry.” The United States was a “God fearing nation,” Bratrud declared, and he hoped that America would “increase in godliness” by standing as “a mighty bulwark of love & justice to all mankind.”³³

Other hawks on the home front favored limited war to prevent the greater evils of further communist conquests and a wider war. Alaska Governor William “Bill” Egan acknowledged that all Americans hated war and were “sickened with the necessity to use all possible force” but, in Vietnam, war was a necessary evil to preserve freedom. If the U.S. withdrew now from South

³⁰ Grace Bancroft to the President, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

³¹ Helen M. Ashworth to the President, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/A,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

³² A. B. Buzzell to the President, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

³³ O. M. Bratrud to the President, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

Vietnam, it “would mean surrendering all of Southeast Asia” to communism whose principal objective was to “bury” the United States.³⁴ Senator Carl Albert (D-OK) pointed out that Johnson was keeping the promise made by every American president since 1954 in supporting South Vietnam and argued that Johnson’s policies would help prevent another world war. “All of us recall the experience of the 1930s,” Albert told Congress on April 8 as he recounted Hitler’s aggression. Johnson was trying to prevent history from repeating itself and Albert agreed that a limited war in Vietnam would hopefully prevent “the big war which would inevitably flow from unchecked aggression.”³⁵ As Senator William Moorhead (D-PA) explained, the U.S. had learned from bitter experience that “failure to resist such an evil purpose cannot bring peace but more aggression leading inevitably to war.” He admitted that Johnson’s billion-dollar pledge was a lot of money, but not “when the cost of war, not only in human lives and suffering but in material costs, is considered.” The costs of supporting South Vietnam were “nothing compared to the cost of unlimited war which would surely be the end result of a policy of weakness or capitulation.”³⁶

A few jingoes, however, called for Johnson to escalate the war in order to defeat communism and defend U.S. national security. In Oceanside, California, the President’s speech took place the same night as the funeral for First Lieutenant Wendell T. Eliason, who had been killed near Da Nang on March 31. The deceased’s brother, Alan, wrote to the President and expressed his support for a firm stance against communism and even carrying the war to North Vietnam. The United States had to be willing “to give support, arms, and lives if necessary,” he wrote, to defend freedom in other lands. America’s own freedom could not be assured “without our willingness to

³⁴ William A. Egan to the President, 7 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

³⁵ The President to Clement J. Zablocki, 9 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

³⁶ The President to Clement J. Zablocki, 9 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

defend freedom elsewhere.”³⁷ A Maryland farmer, Donald Paulus, also wrote approvingly to the President but said he wanted to “see the battle carried further into North Vietnam.” By escalating the war and pressuring the North, the United States could relieve the pressure on the South. He also opposed American taxes being used as aid for Southeast Asia. Finally, Mr. Paulus noted that a group of ministers, misguided in his opinion, had recently taken out a full-page ad against the war imploring “IN THE NAME OF GOD, STOP IT.” “I can’t afford a full page ad,” he wrote, but he begged, “IN THE NAME OF GOD, COUNTRY, AND THE FUTURE, WIN IT.”³⁸

Domestic doves, on the other hand, appreciated Johnson’s willingness to negotiate, but did not think that his speech went far enough to establish peace and they called for peace to replace victory as a war aim since war had become unprofitable and immoral. As the *Chicago American* wrote, Johnson had shown the communists that “making war does not pay, making peace does.”³⁹ Senator Charles Prince (D-IL) called LBJ a “man of peace” and said the United States was willing to do whatever was necessary to defend freedom but would prefer “an honorable peace at the conference table” because “war anywhere is the height of folly.”⁴⁰ Senator Ralph Yarborough (D-TX) similarly praised the President for avoiding “the pitfalls of ... unconditional surrender”⁴¹ while the elderly financier Bernard Baruch hailed Johnson’s “dedication to achieving peace with honor and security.”⁴²

³⁷ Alan E. Eliason to the President, 16 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

³⁸ Donald H. Paulus to the President, 22 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

³⁹ Memo, Wayne Phillips to George Reedy, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁴⁰ The President to Clement J. Zablocki, 9 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁴¹ Ralph Yarborough to the President, 8 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁴² Bernard M. Baruch to the President, 14 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

Doves also chose peace over victory because of moral inflation – they thought the war was too costly and, because they cared more about saving American and enemy lives than winning, they denounced the President’s address for continuing America’s lethal policies. On the left, Ernest Gruening (D-AK) and Wayne Morse (D-OR), the same senators who had voted against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, opposed Johnson’s Vietnam policy once again. They both contended that Vietnam was a civil war and Gruening insisted that bombing would not bring peace. Morse felt that Johnson’s speech showed no intention to negotiate at all. He argued that there was no language to suggest that the U.S. was going to return to the rule of law in Southeast Asia or that the U.S. was actively seeking a peaceful solution to the Vietnam problem. U.S. policy, he thought, told Asians that the United States would rather see them dead than see them live under communist control.⁴³

Johnson himself had announced at Johns Hopkins, “We have no desire to see thousands die in battle – Asians or Americans. We have no desire to devastate that which the people of North Viet-Nam have built with toil and sacrifice.”⁴⁴ Many Americans agreed and clergymen, peace groups, research scientists, and dozens of private citizens decried the continued bombing of North Vietnam and petitioned the President to initiate a ceasefire and stop the bloodshed in Southeast Asia.⁴⁵ Evelyn Batzler, a Baltimore resident, corrected the President (it is “Johns Hopkins University,” she wrote) and insisted he announce “a moratorium on hostilities.” The United States needed to humble itself and, she counselled, “perhaps our consciences could take solace in the fact that while we are being humble we are not murdering any one (‘innocent’ or otherwise).” If a ceasefire did not work, the United States could always resume bombing, but when the war seemed unwinnable, “why keep

⁴³ Senate Reactions to LBJ Speech, undated, #2c, “Gordon Chase – Miscellaneous, Vol. 4,” Box 9, FGC, NSF, LBJPL; Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 10 April 1965, #2b, “Gordon Chase -- Miscellaneous, Vol. 4,” Box 9, FGC, NSF, LBJPL.

⁴⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address at Johns Hopkins University: ‘Peace Without Conquest,’” 7 April 1965, APP.

⁴⁵ DOS, “American Opinion Summary,” 15 April 1965, #10a, “Johns Hopkins Speech Reactions,” Box 194, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

trying?” she asked.⁴⁶ G. L. Collins from San Jose, California, thought bombing was immoral and likely to harden resistance against the U.S. – “we are acting like barbarians” instead of Christians, he wrote.⁴⁷ Phyllis Batten in Port Washington, New York, wrote a pained letter to the President about “the bombing and burning to death of children in Vietnamese villages, an inevitable consequence of this kind of war,” she noted. With three young sons herself, Mrs. Batten sympathized with the mothers in Vietnam who had lost their children. “In such cases,” she continued, “ideologies have no force – only the fact of loss counts.” She commended Johnson’s speech, however, for his “statesmanlike step to end the horror.”⁴⁸ Victor and Jennie Allen from Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, likewise extolled Johnson’s plans for a Great Society in the Mekong Delta. The Allens could not think of a better investment than the development of Vietnam and declared, “Our taxes should be spent on peace rather than napalm, bombs, and gas.”⁴⁹ Another mother, Jeanne Brady of New Hope, Pennsylvania, deplored the bombing of Vietnam and hoped the President would do his “human best to end that as soon as you can... I want to leave a world for my five dear children and all others,” she wrote.⁵⁰

One of the strongest letters came from Beatrice Boyer in Flushing, New York, who lauded the President for “speaking like Mr. Johnson, not like Mr. Goldwater,” but demanded an immediate ceasefire to establish peace. “Get rid of your war-hawk advisers like Mr. McNamara and Mr.

⁴⁶ Evelyn G. Batzler to the President, 10 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁴⁷ G. L. Collins to the President, 11 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁴⁸ Phyllis Batten to the President, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁴⁹ Victor and Jennie Allen to the President, 7 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/A,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁵⁰ Jeanne Brady to the President, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

McGeorge Bundy,” she ordered, “Do not be made a prisoner of the ‘military-industrial complex.’”⁵¹ Unfortunately for the administration, Paul Popple, LBJ’s Assistant for Correspondence who supervised White House mail operations, sent Mrs. Boyer a form letter thanking her for supporting the President’s speech.⁵² In reply she said she supported Johnson’s words but not his policies, “I most vigorously condemn them,” she wrote. “Even as I write this I hear news of continuing atrocities by the U.S. against the people of Vietnam. I am ashamed of being an American now. We call for an immediate ceasefire in Vietnam.”⁵³ She wrote another letter to the President at the end of April in further frustration. “Let me make it clear in my first sentence that we oppose your policy on Vietnam,” she began. The form letters clearly showed that the government was not reading Americans’ pleas, she thought, and she strongly denounced the administration’s policies in Vietnam:

I cannot believe I am living in the United States of America... You talk peace, yet you will not negotiate with the adversary, which is the Vietcong; you keep bombing North Vietnam, a country with which we are not at war. You don’t like the killing of Americans and Vietnamese on our side, yet you rain far greater destructiveness on the enemy and people of S. Vietnam in the form of bombs, napalm, gas, and other brutal torture. You talk peace even while extending the war. One shudders at the similarity of language used by Hitler as he conquered country after country. In the name of God, stop it!⁵⁴

Johnson’s speech also showed that limited war had fully replaced unlimited or total war. Despite the appeals by some war hawks, by 1965, the United States sought not only to contain communism, but war itself in hopes of avoiding a wider or nuclear war. As the President stated, the U.S. would “try to keep the conflict from spreading.”⁵⁵ Johnson still promised to use American power to defend South Vietnam, declaring at Johns Hopkins, “We will use our power with restraint

⁵¹ Beatrice Boyer to the President, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁵² Paul M. Popple to Beatrice Boyer, 20 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁵³ Beatrice Boyer to Paul M. Popple, 26 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁵⁴ Beatrice Boyer to the President, 30 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁵⁵ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address at Johns Hopkins University: ‘Peace Without Conquest,’” 7 April 1965, APP.

and with all the wisdom that we can command. But we will use it.”⁵⁶ But Johnson’s announcement was more significant for the self-limitations on American power than for its exercise. Many doves encouraged the government to negotiate a peace settlement in order to avoid an even more destructive war. Brother R. Pindelski, from St. John Cantius Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, wrote to Johnson because he thought the conflict in Vietnam could not continue “without threatening world peace.” He hoped the president would choose life and seek ways to end “this terrible slaughter.”⁵⁷ Another clergyman, Reverend Allen Byrne of the Methodist Board of Christian Social Concerns of the Northwest Indiana Conference, expressed concern by church leaders in Indiana about “the increased threat of major war in Viet Nam.” He questioned whether American attacks were making peace more likely and feared that instead, the U.S. would bring upon themselves “possible war with Communist China.” He acknowledged that the communists were the aggressors in Vietnam but thought it was in America’s best interests (and the world’s) “not to retaliate with the aggression that we have shown in North Viet Nam.”⁵⁸ Margaret Wendell from Broomall, Pennsylvania, thought Washington, not Hanoi, was risking wider war and she advised Johnson to make further statements and steps “if we are to avoid world-scale war.” The only way negotiations could move forward, she said, was with a ceasefire because “Bombs have no place in making and keeping a just peace... end the war in Vietnam now.”⁵⁹

Other Americans worried that the Vietnam War could become a nuclear war. Raymond Wise in Miami Beach, Florida, told Johnson that “Science has at last made us our brother’s keeper,” and

⁵⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address at Johns Hopkins University: ‘Peace Without Conquest,’” 7 April 1965, APP.

⁵⁷ R. Pindelski to the President, 9 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁵⁸ Allan D. Byrne to the President, 23 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁵⁹ Margaret R. Wendell to the President, 18 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72 Johns Hopkins University 4/7/65,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

he believed that it was in the best interests of all nations “to avoid nuclear war.”⁶⁰ Sydney Berger in Evansville, Indiana, likewise hoped for an honorable peace in the face of “nuclear holocaust.”⁶¹ Similarly, Elizabeth Boyd, a student in Douglass College at the University of Rutgers, urged the President to end the war before conditions worsened. “Your landslide election was a clear mandate for peace,” she explained. “Please negotiate to end the war in Vietnam, now, before the danger escalates. The American people do not want another bloody Korea or a nuclear World War.”⁶²

Conclusion

Although Congress, the press, and the American public widely praised President Johnson’s speech at Johns Hopkins for its moderation, Johnson’s dedication to unconditional discussions, coupled with his devotion to defend South Vietnam’s independence, led his administration to pursue peace without conquest or peace without victory. The spectrum of domestic reactions revealed that the country was similarly divided between victory and peace in Vietnam and illustrated how much of America’s ethics, values, and attitudes about war had changed since Franklin D. Roosevelt demanded the unconditional surrender of Germany, Italy, and Japan. While the willingness to negotiate would once have been denounced as appeasement or weakness, it was now frequently thought of in 1965 as wisdom and strength. For the most part, Americans still rejected withdrawal and appeasement, but the majority no longer thought unconditional surrender, total victory, and unlimited war were profitable or moral. The President and his party, of course, rejected claims that his speech reversed American policies and, by insisting that the United States would not grow tired and not be defeated in Vietnam, Johnson used much of the same rhetoric as his

⁶⁰ Raymond L. Wise to the President, 15 April 1965, “Ex SP 3-72/Pro/A-Z Johns Hopkins University (re. Vietnam),” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁶¹ Sydney L. Berger to the President, 8 April 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

⁶² Elizabeth Boyd to the President, 8 May 1965, “Gen SP 3-72/Pro-Con/B,” Box 168, Subject File Speeches, WHCF, LBJPL.

predecessors had in World War II and Korea. His words, at least, suggested that the U.S. had the same resolve to pay the price necessary to achieve its goals – the will to win – as in previous wars. But even as the Johnson administration outwardly remained as determined as ever, U.S. strategists never planned for total victory and unlimited war. Instead, they orchestrated a limited war for less expansive goals because peace supplanted victory as a war aim. Ultimately, U.S. strategists were not willing to go as far as previous administrations because saving lives and avoiding a wider war became more important than victory. The Johnson administration and the United States thus changed course from peace through victory to victory through peace.

The Decision to Escalate in 1965

To achieve peace without conquest, President Johnson decided to escalate the Vietnam War by sending American soldiers to South Vietnam in the spring and summer of 1965. When he had first taken office in November 1963, U.S. forces in Vietnam totaled 16,000. By passing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, Congress authorized the President to do whatever was necessary to defend South Vietnam and, by the end of the year, the number of U.S. forces had increased to 23,000. Still, by 1965, the Johnson administration had no military recommendations for the deployment of major ground forces. After the attack on Camp Holloway near Pleiku on February 7, 1965, however, Johnson ordered limited reprisal air strikes against North Vietnam (Operation Flaming Dart) and unlimited air actions in South Vietnam. Based on recommendations by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the President also approved the deployment of U.S. Marines and the first American combat troops arrived in Da Nang on March 8, 1965.¹

As McGeorge Bundy explained in July 1965, everyone at the White House had “grave objections to major US ground force deployments.” Even those who favored sending troops, like his brother William Bundy, “wanted to try other things first,” and none of them were prepared or willing to urge on the military in Vietnam (MACV) things the military was not urging on Washington. After the U.S. procured major bases in South Vietnam for its air campaign, however, the military naturally needed soldiers to protect them, and that made it easier for General William Westmoreland to propose additional deployments, and for Washington to accept them. Consequently, in just the three months from the end of March to the beginning of July 1965, recommended troop levels increased from 33,000 to 180,000, and the White House changed the

¹ Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 24 July 1965, #3a, “2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65,” Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

mission of U.S. forces from base security to active combat according to whatever seemed best to General Westmoreland.²

Johnson sent American troops to South Vietnam hoping to duplicate what Truman and Eisenhower had achieved in Korea, namely, repelling communist forces that were invading and infiltrating an American ally in East Asia. But although his rhetoric and decisions show that Johnson and his administration chose war, the debates within the White House and Pentagon about sending more soldiers to Vietnam reveal that the determination to escalate was nevertheless a determination to limit the war in Vietnam.³ Johnson's decision to pursue a moderate path to peace without conquest led to more measured strategies that avoided both total war and total withdrawal. Indeed, the arguments for and against escalation in 1965 all exhibited limited attitudes about the war. There were no calls for total victory, all-out war, or maximum effort; the administration wanted to keep the war contained, geographically and militarily. Once again, containment cut both ways. For the United States, containing communist aggression amounted to negative victory – denying victory to the enemy and seeking peace without victory for themselves. And while U.S. strategists never deceived themselves into thinking that more soldiers would not lead to more casualties, they still focused on limiting their losses, rather than showing a willingness to bear the losses necessary to achieve their objectives. In short, even while Johnson and his advisors chose to escalate instead of withdraw, their decisions were conditioned by their fears of a wider and more costly war and they called for more men and more money to accomplish only what was necessary. They enlarged the war, ultimately, to keep it small.

² Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 24 July 1965, #3a, "2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65," Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

³ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

HONOLULU RECOMMENDATIONS (APRIL 1965): NEGATIVE VICTORY

Recommendations for more troops grew in April 1965. During the first week of April, Johnson decided to send two additional Marine battalions to South Vietnam, along with 18-20,000 support forces on the recommendations of the Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. At the end of the month, McNamara traveled to Hawaii to confer with some of the leading U.S. officials in South Vietnam about the war. On April 20 in Honolulu, he met with General Maxwell Taylor who was now the ambassador to South Vietnam; General Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs; Admiral U.S. Grant Sharpe and General William Westmoreland; Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John McNaughton, and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs William Bundy.⁴ No one foresaw any improvement in the situation in South Vietnam. The war was already a stalemate. But instead of planning how to break the deadlock by defeating the enemy or forcing them to surrender, the strategists in Honolulu talked in terms of negative military “victory.” The objective was to break the will of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong “by denying them victory.” As Ambassador Taylor explained, if the United States could demonstrate communist impotence, the enemy would eventually seek a political solution. In other words, the military wanted to prevent the Viet Cong from winning, and prevent the United States and South Vietnam from losing. But no one in Honolulu expected North Vietnam or the Viet Cong to capitulate or reach a position acceptable to the United States by the end of the year, in part because Taylor and the military commanders thought that a settlement would result more from Viet Cong failure in the south than pain in the north and it would likely take a year or two to demonstrate that the Viet Cong could not win. In the meantime, the U.S. needed to avoid “a spectacular defeat” of South Vietnamese or American forces.

⁴ Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 24 July 1965, #3a, “2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65,” Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

So, in order to bolster South Vietnam's forces and to prove to the Viet Cong that they could not win – without dragging out the ground war “indefinitely” – the officials in Honolulu determined to reinforce GVN ground forces with 20+ battalion equivalents. And since the GVN could not raise those reinforcements themselves, they would have to come from the United States and other countries. Based on the discussions in Hawaii, therefore, McNamara recommended additional deployments to increase planned American troop strength in South Vietnam from 51,000 to 82,000.⁵

MAY 1965

On May 4, Johnson asked Congress for \$700 million to meet the military requirements in Vietnam.⁶ By that point, more than 400 Americans had died in the war, the number of U.S. armed forces in South Vietnam had reached 35,000, and the number of air sorties against North Vietnam had increased from 160 in February, to 1,500 in April.⁷ Johnson's message to Congress though, revealed how the paradoxes of the war challenged American values and priorities. As Johnson argued, the Vietnam War was not your father's war. Instead of sweeping invasion forces and massive open battles, there was a steady stream of men who committed “murder in the night.” But even though this war of national liberation in Southeast Asia involved different military realities than World War II, Johnson contended that the overall purpose of aggression there was the same: to overthrow the freedom of nations. Americans were thus killing and dying in Vietnam for the same purposes as in World War II and Korea, he argued, and the United States remained committed to supporting South Vietnam against aggression and would continue to fight until it had achieved its

⁵ Memo, Robert S. McNamara to the President, 21 April 1965, #3b, “2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65,” Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL; Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 24 July 1965, #3a, “2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65,” Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

⁶ Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 24 July 1965, #3a, “2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65,” Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress Requesting Additional Appropriations for Military Needs in Viet-Nam,” 4 May 1965, APP.

goals. The President declared, “we cannot, and will not, withdraw or be defeated. The stakes are too high, the commitment too deep, the lessons of history too plain.” The most important lesson, he explained, was that appeasement did not work – giving in simply led to more bloodshed and wider war – and Johnson was determined not to repeat the mistakes of Chamberlain and the democracies at Munich when they had sacrificed Czechoslovakia to Adolf Hitler, hoping to avoid another world war. But Johnson’s determination to defend South Vietnam, to contain communist aggression, and to not withdraw was challenged by his fears of a wider war and his unwillingness to un-limit America’s power. “We have no desire to expand the conflict,” he announced. “We will do what must be done. And we will do only what must be done.”⁸ Caught between the need for more money, more soldiers, and more power on the one hand, and the desire to keep the war limited, Johnson created his own paradox: he enlarged the war to keep it small.

Some of Johnson’s advisors worried about the dangers of that paradox. On May 17, Clark Clifford, who now served as an unofficial White House Counsel, wrote to the President and urged him not to escalate the war:

I believe our ground forces in South Vietnam should be kept to a minimum, consistent with the protection of our installations and property in that country. My concern is that a substantial buildup of U.S. ground troops would be construed by the Communists, and by the world, as a determination on our part to win the war on the ground.

This could be a quagmire. It could turn into an open end commitment on our part that would take more and more ground troops, without a realistic hope of ultimate victory.

I do not think the situation is comparable to Korea. The political posture of the parties involved, and the physical conditions, including terrain, are entirely different.

I continue to believe that the constant probing of every avenue leading to a possible settlement will ultimately be fruitful. It won’t be what we want, but we can learn to live with it.⁹

⁸ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress Requesting Additional Appropriations for Military Needs in Viet-Nam,” 4 May 1965, APP.

⁹ Letter, Clark M. Clifford to the President, 17 May 1965, #14, “2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65,” Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

In essence, Clifford argued that victory in Vietnam was impossible, and the United States should adjust its goals and strategies accordingly. The U.S. should not be trying to win the ground war or guarantee South Vietnam's sovereignty, he said. Consequently, the number and role of American troops should be kept to a minimum. The U.S. should only send soldiers to defend concrete American interests, like its property on military bases. The war itself was an unwinnable quagmire – an inescapable trap that would absorb more troops and lives without ever producing victory. In other words, the United States could increase its means without ever achieving its ends. The incongruent nature of the war itself meant that the U.S. would continue to incur the war's costs without gaining the benefits. Given that cost-benefit relationship, Vietnam was not like Korea or World War II. The political and physical geography of Indochina was completely different and that meant that strategies that had worked before would be unprofitable here. Neither limited nor unlimited war would force Hanoi to meet Washington's demands. The only possible victory in Vietnam was a settlement. In short, Clifford exhorted Johnson not to pick his battle in Vietnam; the current war could not be won, and the United States should learn to live with that.

JUNE-JULY 1965

The Pentagon could not live with defeat, however, and continued to request more soldiers. On June 16, McNamara publicly acknowledged that the war was not going well for the United States and announced the planned deployment of fifteen battalions, bringing the total U.S. military strength to almost 75,000. Five days earlier though, after discussions with Ambassador Taylor and MACV, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended deploying an additional 116,000 forces and on July 2, after further talks with Taylor and MACV, the chiefs wanted to increase total troop strength to 179,000. With nearly 80,000 American soldiers in South Vietnam and recommendations for another 100,000

by November, Johnson sent McNamara to South Vietnam to assess the situation and the need for more troops.¹⁰

After being briefed by General Westmoreland, McNamara returned to Washington on July 20 and supported the Joint Chiefs' recommendations for 100,000 more soldiers. The U.S. could withdraw or escalate but, if they wanted to save South Vietnam, there was really only one choice because South Vietnam could not defend itself. McNamara argued though that the U.S. could escalate without risking Soviet or Chinese intervention and without losing domestic support although that still did not solve the problem of how the United States would eventually get out of Vietnam. Escalation was still limited, however. Caught between the refusal to withdraw in order not to lose South Vietnam and Southeast Asia and the rejection of a wider and more costly war, McNamara again proposed sending more Americans to Vietnam to achieve a negative victory. "Our object in Vietnam," the secretary explained, "is to create conditions for a favorable outcome by demonstrating to the VC/DRV that the odds are against their winning" but the U.S. wanted to create those conditions "without causing the war to expand into one with China or the Soviet Union and in a way which preserves support of the American people" and their allies and friends.¹¹ Once again, the United States settled for a limited war and peace without victory because U.S. strategists wanted the benefits of containing communism without the costs of an expanded unpopular war.

To McNamara, a "favorable outcome" involved nine fundamental elements – none of which constituted or added up to military victory. First, the Viet Cong would stop their attacks and reduce their terror and sabotage. Second, North Vietnam would reduce its infiltration. Third, the U.S. and South Vietnam would stop bombing North Vietnam. Fourth, South Vietnam would remain

¹⁰ Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 24 July 1965, #3a, "2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65," Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

¹¹ Memo, Robert S. McNamara to the President, 20 July 1965, #12, "2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65," Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

independent and hopefully pro-U.S. although McNamara acknowledged that it could become “genuinely neutral.” Fifth, the Saigon regime would effectively govern all of South Vietnam. Sixth, the communists in Laos and Thailand would “remain quiescent.” Seventh, North Vietnam would withdraw its forces from South Vietnam. Eighth, the National Liberation Front would be converted from a military to a purely political organization. And ninth, U.S. combat forces (though not advisors) would withdraw.¹² McNamara’s “favorable outcome” then, amounted to peace without victory.

The war currently contained little hope for a favorable outcome, however. McNamara acknowledged that the situation in South Vietnam had worsened every year and that the Viet Cong currently held the initiative. Pacification in the countryside was making little progress, Saigon was providing security to fewer Vietnamese in less territory over time, and cities in South Vietnam were becoming more isolated. South Vietnam’s economy was also deteriorating. The situation was so bad that McNamara estimated that the Ky government had less than a fifty percent chance of surviving the year. Meanwhile, ARVN forces were suffering manpower shortages because of heavy losses and high rates of desertion. Considering those conditions, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong appeared to believe that South Vietnam was “on the run and near collapse; they show no signs of settling for less than a complete take-over,” the secretary warned.¹³

Faced with those conditions, McNamara outlined three options for the United States: withdraw, stay the course, or escalate. In the first scenario, the U.S. could cut its losses and “withdraw under the best conditions” possible, although McNamara thought withdrawal would be utterly humiliating and would likely hurt America’s future missions on the world stage. The U.S.

¹² Memo, Robert S. McNamara to the President, 20 July 1965, #12, “2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65,” Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

¹³ Memo, Robert S. McNamara to the President, 20 July 1965, #12, “2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65,” Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

could also maintain its current course, “holding on and playing for the breaks,” although its position would grow weaker and would likely force the U.S. to choose later between withdrawal and “an emergency expansion of forces, perhaps too late to do any good.” The real choice then was between withdrawal or expansion – the U.S. could expand its military pressure against the Viet Cong in the south and maintain its military pressure in the north, while exploring diplomatic and political channels to reach a settlement.¹⁴ The third option, McNamara contended, promised to stave off defeat in the short run and offered a decent chance of a settlement in the long run although the secretary admitted that it would also lead to further casualties and would make a later decision to withdraw even more difficult and costly. McNamara still recommended expanding the war though because it offered “the best odds of the best outcome with the most acceptable cost to the United States.

To escalate, McNamara recommended increasing American personnel in Vietnam from 75,000 to 175,000. He also wanted Johnson to ask Congress to call up 235,000 men in the Reserve and National Guard for a two-year period although they would be replaced by regular forces and released after only one year. The secretary further recommended that the regular armed forces be increased by approximately 375,000 men and that more money be sought from Congress to cover the additional costs of the buildup in Vietnam. With these measures in place, the United States would have around 600,000 men to guard against contingencies in Vietnam. Those forces could then be used to take the offensive and destroy the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces in the south. Meanwhile, the U.S. would continue bombing military targets in North Vietnam. Air strikes would still avoid civilian and industrial targets not related to the war effort, but the campaign would focus on interdicting the flow of material to the south. McNamara also wanted the U.S. to be prepared to

¹⁴ Ambassadors Lodge, Taylor, and Johnson agreed that further peace initiatives by the U.S., without military strength behind it, would simply bolster the communist resolve to keep fighting.

retaliate if the Viet Cong or DRV committed “a particularly damaging or horrendous act.” At the same time, McNamara acknowledged that the military could not solve the Vietnam problem on its own. He therefore recommended that the U.S. continue to “strengthen the rear” with rural reconstruction or pacification, work with Saigon to make the government more effective and stable, and take steps to meet South Vietnam’s economic shortages and disruptions such as rice inflation. Finally, the U.S. should undermine enemy morale by emphasizing American successes and revitalizing the Chieu Hoi program to encourage Viet Cong defections. Ambassador Taylor, Ambassador-designate Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson, General Wheeler, Admiral Sharp, and General Westmoreland all agreed with McNamara’s specific recommendations.

Moreover, McNamara felt the U.S. did not have much of a choice if it wanted to save South Vietnam because he did not think ARVN was capable of successfully resisting the Viet Cong without more active assistance from the from the United States. Saigon knew this too and, based on his conversations with leaders there, McNamara thought South Vietnam would welcome the additional help. “They know that you are not here to make us a colony,” Nguyen Van Thieu, the Chairman of the National Leadership Committee, had told him.

McNamara also argued that the U.S. could escalate without risking Soviet or Chinese involvement. The Soviets would likely continue their material assistance to North Vietnam, but the secretary did not expect them to intervene, and China would probably not commit ground forces or aircraft as long as the U.S. did not invade North Vietnam, sink a Chinese ship, or attack Chinese territory. The greatest threat of expanding the war was that North Vietnam would send more soldiers south to assist the Viet Cong which could tempt the United States to “counter-invade” and begin bombing population targets in the north, thereby leading to Chinese or Soviet involvement.

Lastly, McNamara asserted that the United States could escalate without losing domestic support for the war. American and South Vietnamese casualties would undoubtedly increase, perhaps to the rate of 500 Americans killed per month by the end of 1965. Nevertheless, McNamara anticipated that the public would support escalation because it was “sensible and courageous” and likely to succeed. How could anyone oppose his plan?

Even if the United States succeeded in achieving McNamara’s “favorable outcome,” however, it still faced one major problem: how to get out of Vietnam. The secretary admitted that “it is not obvious how we will be able to disengage our forces from Vietnam.” An acceptable peace settlement that would allow the U.S. to withdraw was unlikely and McNamara wondered whether a large number of American or international forces might have to stay in Vietnam. Overall, though, McNamara thought his plan had “a good chance of achieving an acceptable outcome within a reasonable time in Vietnam.”¹⁵

McNamara’s recommendations sparked fierce debates among U.S. strategists about what the United States was fighting for and how far the U.S. should be willing to go to achieve its objectives. On July 21, 1965, the day after McNamara submitted his recommendations for escalation, President Johnson met to discuss them with his advisors in the Cabinet Room of the White House. In the initial, preparatory meeting at 10:30 AM without the President, McNamara reiterated his key points. General Wheeler and Dean Rusk both seemed optimistic about the troop increases, but Undersecretary of State George Ball was more pessimistic. He felt it was important to paint “a sombre [sic] picture” and dispel the ideas that the U.S. would be over the hump after the Monsoon period. Critically, McNamara also acknowledged that the size of U.S. forces in South Vietnam could give Hanoi the impression that the U.S. planned to march north, and McNamara wanted to ensure

¹⁵ Memo, Robert S. McNamara to the President, 20 July 1965, #12, “2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65,” Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

that Hanoi, Peiping, and Moscow all knew that the U.S. had no such intentions.¹⁶ Clarifying American goals was nothing new, of course, the Roosevelt and Truman administrations had fielded calls to clarify unconditional surrender throughout World War II. But while Roosevelt and Truman had repeatedly reinforced their commitment to total victory to show Germany and Japan that the United States would not be swayed from its purposes, McNamara thought the U.S. should go out of its way to demonstrate its commitment to limited war. He seemed not to consider that Hanoi and its allies might see a commitment to limited war as a sign of weakness, not strength.

McNamara summarized his recommendations again when the President joined the meeting at 11:30 AM and Johnson asked pointed questions. McNamara's report offered no sense of victory, only continuing stalemate, and the President wanted to know why the U.S. could not get more troops from third countries. If they decided to withdraw now, would the U.S. have to call up more troops and suffer more casualties later? Why the recommended number of troops, Johnson asked, why not more or less? What would the increased force accomplish? McNamara reviewed the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. A year ago, the Viet Cong had controlled less than twenty percent of the population, now they controlled twenty-five percent, he explained.¹⁷ As the Viet Cong had expanded their control of the country, they had isolated cities in the south and inflicted heavy casualties on ARVN. Unless the United States stepped in with more forces, he argued, the Viet Cong would push the GVN into small enclaves which would become ineffective. Johnson understood but, even with those conditions, he wanted the U.S. mission to be as limited as they dared. Once again, even though the President seemed willing to do whatever it took to save South Vietnam, his attitude showed reluctance, not ruthlessness. Rather than maximizing their efforts,

¹⁶ Memo, Chester L. Cooper to the President, 21 July 1965, #7, "2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65," Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

¹⁷ CIA Director William Raborn Jr. went further and estimated that the Viet Cong controlled 25% of the population during the day and 50% at night.

Johnson wanted to minimize America's involvement and restrict the number and role of U.S. troops to what was absolutely necessary in Vietnam.

Johnson then asked for any dissent which primarily came from George Ball. Believing that the U.S. was engaged in "a very perilous voyage," Ball expressed apprehension about the U.S. ability to defeat the Viet Cong because of the terrain and political situation in South Vietnam although he said he would go along with McNamara's report. Johnson noted the dangers but wondered whether the U.S. had any other options. Ball replied that he could not offer a course of action that would allow the U.S. to "cut our losses" easily but the U.S. should weigh the costs of cutting losses now as opposed to later when the pressures to enlarge the war would be "almost irresistible."¹⁸ The U.S. would simply have to take the risk of Southeast Asia becoming communist, but Ball thought the losses would short-lived. The President appreciated Ball's concerns and wanted to minimize the dangers as well, but he felt he had no other choice. However, Johnson said he would like to explore other alternatives now or as the U.S. went forward and he asked Ball to present an alternative course of action later that afternoon. Continuing with his explanation, McNamara concluded that the U.S. should either increase its forces in South Vietnam or get out. Ball clearly favored the latter, but McNamara and the military pressed for more troops although, given ARVN's casualties and desertions, General Wheeler questioned whether even 100,000 more men would be enough.

At 2:30 PM, Johnson met with his advisors again and Ball expounded on his alternative policy. Fundamentally, Ball was skeptical of Westerners' ability to successfully wage war in Vietnam because of the political and geographic terrain and, like Clark Clifford, Ball thought the United States was becoming more mired in an unwinnable war. If the war could be won in a year with reasonable casualties, he would not be too concerned, but he thought the U.S. needed at least two

¹⁸ Ball claimed his views were based on "cold-blooded calculation," not a moral position.

more years and they would have to use so much manpower at the beginning with no definitive results that the U.S. would look weak to the rest of the world. He also felt that the U.S. had underestimated the seriousness of the Vietnam problem from the beginning and continued to do so. “It is like giving cobalt treatment to a terminal cancer case,” he described. The least harmful way for the U.S. to cut its losses was to let Saigon decide that it did not want American assistance. Ball had no illusions about the consequences for Vietnam and Southeast Asia if the United States withdrew and allowed South Vietnam to fall to communism, but as Clifford had written, the U.S. should learn to live with that. Moreover, in reviewing the results of falling dominoes, Ball did not think they would be as harmful in the long run as everyone expected.

Johnson likewise regretted that the United States was embroiled in Vietnam. “But we are there,” he said, and he thought the South Vietnamese wanted the U.S. there, despite the changes in their government. The President shared everyone’s concerns about GVN instability, however. Could Westerners fight a war in Vietnam, he asked. How could the U.S. fight a war under a government that changes so frequently?

To McGeorge Bundy, who agreed with McNamara’s proposals, it sounded like Ball was saying that the U.S. would not be in the clear after the monsoon season and that no single speech would reassure the American people. Like McNamara, Bundy thought the U.S. should either withdraw or escalate and the U.S. would have to face the ominous consequences of either decision. Ultimately, however, Bundy disagreed with Ball and thought the ramifications of escalation exceeded those of withdrawal. “We are asking Americans to bet more to achieve less,” he stated. By escalating, the U.S. would have to undertake a more intensive political and economic effort and, at least at first, there would be no victories and heavy casualties. Bundy disputed Ball’s “cancer analogy,” however. South Vietnam was undoubtedly weak and immature, he conceded, but a non-communist society

was struggling to be born. He felt the administration would have time to evaluate whether escalation was working and could change course after giving it a try. Ball disagreed. He thought the larger the commitment, the more difficult it would be to leave. “We won’t get out,” he declared, “we’ll double our bet and get lost in the rice paddies.” Bundy though, thought Ball’s shift in strategy would be “disastrous.” He preferred to maintain the present commitment and “waffle through” than withdraw. The country was just not in the mood to accept bad news.

Dean Rusk also preferred to escalate rather than withdraw because he worried withdrawal would wreck America’s international credibility. Ball’s plan could be dangerous if it made communist leaders think that the U.S. could not see a crisis through. Rusk was also more optimistic about escalation and did not think it would be too costly. He thought additional U.S. forces would destroy the Viet Cong’s capacity to employ major forces against South Vietnam. More American soldiers also would not change the nature of the war, he contended. The U.S. had already gone a long way on the ground and in the air without escalating.

McNamara agreed with Rusk about the international implications of withdrawal and thought Ball was underestimating the costs of cutting losses and overstating the costs of McNamara’s proposal. He agreed though that it would take at least two years to pacify South Vietnam and General Wheeler added that it was unreasonable to expect a “win” in the next year, regardless of the number of American soldiers. Nevertheless, Wheeler thought the U.S. could reverse the tide of the war in a year and make definite progress in three. Johnson jumped in and asked whether the U.S. could win the Vietnam War without using nuclear weapons if China entered the war. Wheeler stated that the U.S. could in Southeast Asia – contrary to Ball, he thought U.S. forces could operate victoriously in the terrain there. Vietnam, he maintained, was simply the first “war of National Liberation.” If the U.S. walked out, it would just have to fight other wars elsewhere. Johnson noted

that the U.S. had been fighting for twenty months in Vietnam, why would this new effort be successful? Wheeler replied that additional U.S. forces would rescue a deteriorating situation.¹⁹

Vietnam thus presented U.S. strategists with a clear choice in 1965 – withdraw or escalate – and they chose to escalate the war to rescue South Vietnam. But escalation was still limited. U.S. strategists sought negative victory, only approved troop levels they considered absolutely necessary, and, as Johnson stated, limited the U.S. mission as much as they dared. Just as peace without conquest pledged a moderate path between unconditional surrender and appeasement, so escalation committed the U.S. to a temperate strategy between total war and total withdrawal. Johnson and his advisors were not oblivious to the dangers or consequences of their choice, they knew more soldiers would lead to more casualties, and that escalation would deepen the country's commitment to Vietnam. But they felt confident that 175,000 American soldiers could contain communist aggression without provoking a wider war and they believed that the costs of withdrawal would be worse than escalation, even if it succeeded in getting the U.S. out of Vietnam. Strategists like Clark Clifford and George Ball, however, expressed grave apprehensions about American ends and means. They doubted not only the wisdom of U.S. strategy but the effectiveness of American efforts to win a war that seemed unwinnable.

¹⁹ Memo, Chester L. Cooper to the President, 21 July 1965, #7, "2E 1965 Troop Decision 5/65-7/65," Box 74, VCF, NSF, LBJPL.

Sticking it Out in 1967

By the end of 1967, the Johnson administration had escalated the war until the United States had more than half a million soldiers in Vietnam. On the ground, the Pentagon's attrition strategy had inflicted severe casualties on North Vietnamese forces and reduced the influence of the National Liberation Front (NLF) or Viet Cong in South Vietnam, but it gave the initiative to the enemy who took advantage of the terrain and borders to sap the strength and morale of U.S. forces. In the air, U.S. bombers continued to pulverize North Vietnam in Operation Rolling Thunder to coerce Hanoi into negotiating an end to the war or at least terminating its support for the insurgency in the south. But the campaign did not destroy North Vietnam's capacity or will to fight, or stop the Viet Cong, while causing thousands of collateral casualties. At home, the war continued to tear at the fabric of American society and the anti-war movement gained momentum. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had publicly come out against the war in a speech at Riverside Church in New York City in April and, later that month, nearly half a million people turned out in New York City and San Francisco to oppose the war in the Spring Mobilization march. On October 21, more than 100,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to protest the war but about half that number broke away and joined an illegal March on the Pentagon where they confronted U.S. soldiers. Nevertheless, President Johnson maintained a slim majority of support for the war as long as his generals were optimistic and the U.S. appeared to be making limited progress.

Faced with a quagmire that the United States seemingly could not win nor escape as well as domestic divisions, President Johnson and his advisors reevaluated American strategy in Vietnam in November 1967. General Maxwell Taylor, who now served as a special consultant to the President,

condensed U.S. strategy into four options: “Pull-out, Pull-back, All-out, Stick-it-out.”¹ Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara recommended pulling back in a memorandum on 1 November 1967, which raised fundamental questions about the definition of American goals in Vietnam and how far the United States was willing to go to achieve those goals.² Ultimately, most of Johnson’s advisors decided to stick it out but, even as the Johnson administration determined to stay the course at the end of 1967, their debates about McNamara’s proposals and U.S. strategy showed that U.S. officials valued victory less, had less tolerance for the human costs of war, and less will to win because they thought total victory was impossible in Vietnam, because they feared a wider war with greater casualties, and they did not want to aggravate public dissent against the war.

MCNAMARA’S PROPOSALS

In his memorandum, McNamara told President Johnson that a “continuation of our present course of action would be dangerous, costly in lives, and unsatisfactory to the American people.”³ Because McNamara did not think that the U.S. would make enough progress to achieve peace or convince Americans that “there is light at the end of the tunnel” in the next fifteen months, he thought public opinion would encourage the U.S. to either escalate the war in the north and expand it on the ground in the south, or to withdraw. To avoid the further polarization of public opinion, McNamara proposed a series of strategies to limit the war and push North Vietnam into negotiations on a “fight or talk” basis. First, McNamara proposed a bombing halt in North Vietnam and the start of negotiations. Second, he wanted to “stabilize” U.S. military strength in Vietnam at current levels and establish a moratorium on troop increases. Lastly, he proposed to constrain the

¹ Memo, Maxwell D. Taylor to the President, 3 November 1967, #19, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

² Memo, LBJ to Himself, 18 December 1967, #1a, “Vietnam, Conduct of War in,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

³ Memo, Robert S. McNamara to the President, 1 November 1967, #31, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

war by committing to not extend the ground war into North Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia; not to blockade or mine Haiphong harbor or bomb irrigation dikes; to decrease American and South Vietnamese casualties; and to transfer more military responsibility to South Vietnam.⁴ At maximum, McNamara hoped that his strategies would lead to successful negotiations; at minimum, he thought his strategies would avoid the pressure he feared to expand the war.⁵ But the overarching purpose of McNamara's recommendations was to assuage apprehensions at home that the war would expand further, and to increase pressure on Hanoi to reduce its military operations or begin peace talks.⁶

All of McNamara's strategies were intended to limit U.S. commitment, casualties, and costs in Vietnam and showed that he cared less about victory, more about American lives, and felt reluctant to prosecute the war. By recommending a bombing halt and the start of negotiations, McNamara indicated that he sought peace without victory, rather than peace through victory. A bombing halt was unthinkable in World War II – it never occurred to U.S. strategists to stop bombing Berlin or Tokyo *before* they had surrendered, and it certainly defied military logic to stop bombing Germany and Japan *in order* to make them surrender. The same was true for negotiations. The Roosevelt and Truman administrations had refused to negotiate with Germany and Japan and demanded their unconditional surrender. They agreed to work out political settlements *after* their enemies quit fighting, conceded defeat, and surrendered at the discretion of the Allies.

McNamara's plan to stabilize the number of U.S. forces in Vietnam also flew in the face of the war-without-cost attitude that Henry Stimson and other strategists had exhibited in World War II. While every President, advisor, and general wanted to limit American casualties as much as

⁴ Table, "Sec. McNamara's draft recommendations of Nov. 1, 1967 and the views of others on the issues raised," #2, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

⁵ Letter, Walt W. Rostow to the President, 2 November 1967, #3, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

⁶ Memo, Maxwell D. Taylor to the President, 3 November 1967, #19, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

possible, U.S. strategists in World War II always spoke of utilizing maximum effort and they were willing to expend as many soldiers as necessary to achieve total victory. While McNamara's stabilization strategy certainly adhered to the spirit of saving American lives, the policy of establishing an arbitrary ceiling on U.S. forces – regardless of whether they achieved their goals – reversed conventional military priorities. In World War II, peace through victory meant killing and dying to accomplish total victory, but stabilization focused on saving lives in order to end the war in Vietnam.

Finally, by committing to a more limited war, McNamara upheld means over ends. He wanted to keep the war limited geographically and militarily, not only because he was sensitive to public opinion and the popular demands to save American lives and dollars, but because he wanted to limit the war morally as well. His commitments to not extend the ground war into North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and his refusal to blockade Haiphong or bomb irrigation dikes, suggested that, by this point, McNamara regarded *jus in bello* (how the United States fought) as more important than *jus ad bellum* (what the United States was fighting for). U.S. strategists certainly had their own constraints in World War II and never completely embraced absolute unlimited war, but they largely rejected strategies that would have limited their capacity to achieve total victory. World War II was already a global conflict by the time the U.S. joined the Allies and White House officials were always sensitive to sovereign borders, but they never seemed to embrace self-limitations because their goals were better served by un-limiting their efforts. U.S. forces may not have had to worry about the international implications of blockading German and Japanese harbors, but they made no effort to restrain themselves. In the Pacific, U.S. ships blockaded every Japanese *and* Korean harbor of consequence and B-29s bombed out scores of Japanese cities filled with innocent men, women, and children because U.S. strategists believed their ends justified their means.

DEVALUATION OF VICTORY

McNamara's recommendations indicated that the Secretary of all Defense wanted peace without victory rather than peace *through* victory, but other advisors argued that pulling back was just the first step in pulling out and they denounced McNamara for abandoning America's objectives and shrinking from the price of victory. In a scathing set of comments, Associate Justice Abe Fortas arraigned McNamara's recommendations and claimed that if the U.S. did not win, it would give victory to the communists. "I can think of nothing worse than the suggested program," Fortas decided. He thought McNamara's strategy was "a step in the process of withdrawal" that would only encourage further demands to withdraw from Vietnam. In his mind, pulling back was simply a prerequisite for pulling out and Fortas told Johnson that McNamara's plans would serve as "a powerful tonic to Chinese Communist effectiveness in the world; and a profound retreat to the Asian dominoes."⁷ Maxwell Taylor likewise opposed McNamara's recommendations because he reckoned that pull-back would "degenerate into an eventual pull-out" and jeopardize America's war aims.⁸

Fortas, Clark Clifford, and General William Westmoreland especially opposed McNamara's bombing halt because they thought it worked against American objectives. The whole point of Operation Rolling Thunder in the first place was to coerce Hanoi into negotiating an end to the war or, at minimum, to halt its support for the Viet Cong insurgency. And to be effective, the campaign needed to put pressure on North Vietnam's logistical system, Westmoreland told Walt Rostow. The General therefore wanted to maintain pressure on North Vietnam by attacking railway lines, keeping shipments out of Hanoi and Haiphong, and destroying the north's temporary bridges. In fact,

⁷ Comments, Abe Fortas, 5 November 1967, #11, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

⁸ Memo, Maxwell D. Taylor to the President, 3 November 1967, #19, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

Westmoreland felt that bombing south of the twentieth parallel was “absolutely essential” and he preferred to continue bombing all the way to the Chinese border.⁹ What would coerce Hanoi into stopping its war efforts if the United States stopped its coercion first? The goal had to be victory, Fortas explained, negotiation was not an objective or target, so stabilization and a bombing halt just did not make any sense to him. Halting the bombing of North Vietnam was “an invitation to slaughter,” he claimed. If the U.S. stopped bombing, its forces would be exposed, its pressure on North Vietnam would end, and “we will have given the Communists victory which they will exploit and escalate.” In short, Fortas thought McNamara’s strategy would do the opposite of what McNamara wanted. The strategy would actually risk more American lives, abandon South Vietnam, and open the door to communist expansion throughout Southeast Asia. Fortas thought the rationale for a bombing halt was completely wrong too. He explained, “if Hanoi wishes to talk or to de-escalate, it is preposterous, I submit, to suppose that they are waiting for a signal – and that the only signal acceptable is a halt in bombing!”¹⁰ Meanwhile, Clifford argued that a bombing halt would undo America’s progress towards victory and make future progress more difficult because it would allow North Vietnam to repair their infrastructure, improve their defenses, and strengthen their war industries. It also would embolden China and the USSR to “redouble their efforts to drive us out of Asia.”¹¹ Westmoreland, Fortas, and Clifford all agreed that a bombing halt was a plan for peace, but not victory.

Clifford also denounced McNamara’s limited war proposals more broadly for the same reasons. He contended that pulling back would totally ruin the U.S. bargaining position, namely, its ability to coerce North Vietnam into accepting the United States’ demands. A public bombing halt

⁹ Memo, Walt W. Rostow to the President, 20 November 1967, #38, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

¹⁰ Comments, Abe Fortas, 5 November 1967, #11, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

¹¹ Memo, Clark Clifford to the President, #12, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

and the stabilization of U.S. forces, he explained, would effectively announce to the world that the U.S. “would refrain from practically all activities that would be damaging to North Vietnam. It would be tantamount to turning over our hole card and showing Hanoi that it was a deuce.” Had the United States “ever successfully terminated a war by such a program?” Clifford asked. He reminded the President that in World War I, World War II, and Korea, “the pressure was constantly increased until the enemy found it intolerable and capitulated.” How would any of McNamara’s strategies put *more* pressure on Hanoi and North Vietnam to negotiate in good faith or end the war? Coercing Hanoi into accepting American demands by *decreasing* the pressure and costs of war and limiting the military’s strategies short of achieving their goals was not merely a radical departure from American strategy, but antithetical to the entire concept of warfare. By pulling back and releasing the pressure on North Vietnam, the United States might win peace, but not victory.

The eventual outcome from the war was, U.S. strategists hoped, peace. Everyone in the United States wanted to end the war and have peace, Clifford acknowledged. “The President and every man around him wants to end the war,” he wrote. “But the future of our children and grandchildren require that it be ended by accomplishing our purpose, i.e., the thwarting of the aggression by North Vietnam, aided by China and Russia.” The right way to end the war in Vietnam, Clifford argued, was to do it on American terms and that meant sticking it out to achieve America’s goals. Peace would be worthless if the United States did not reach it through victory. Clifford claimed the entire world was watching “to see if the United States meant what it said when it announced its intention to help defend South Vietnam,” and if the U.S. could not or would not back up its commitments, its international credibility would be ruined. McNamara’s recommendations to

pull back could open the door to future conflicts, Clifford hinted, and, if ending the war led directly to future wars, what good was peace in Vietnam?¹²

What Clifford and others really wanted, therefore, was peace through victory. To achieve U.S. objectives and prevail against communism, Fortas wanted to stick it out and keep the pressure on North Vietnam and destroy the Viet Cong in South Vietnam while General Westmoreland rejected McNamara's limited war out of military necessity because he wanted to keep U.S. options open. As the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, Westmoreland was unwilling to subordinate military victory to the longings for peace or concerns for American lives, as McNamara proposed. The General insisted to Walt Rostow that minimizing U.S. casualties was his "constant endeavor" and that every operation was undertaken to reduce U.S. and allied losses, but he also did not want his tactical operations to be controlled or limited by those criteria. Westmoreland likewise claimed that giving more responsibility to South Vietnamese forces was his "central purpose" for the next two years, but a mature operational program did not exist yet. For the United States to achieve its long-term purposes in Vietnam, it had to do more than simply fulfill its immediate objectives, it had to leave behind a military establishment capable of looking after itself.¹³ Thus, while Westmoreland was constantly concerned with American lives and wanted to see South Vietnam take more responsibility for the war, victory came first.

Because defeating communist forces remained his supreme concern, Westmoreland rebuffed the pledges to constrain the military. He, like everyone else in the country, obviously hoped Vietnam would not require any more soldiers and did not envisage sending more troops there, but Westmoreland thought it would be "foolish" to announce now that the U.S. had reached its

¹² Memo, Clark Clifford to the President, #12, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

¹³ Memo, Walt W. Rostow to the President, 20 November 1967, #38, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

manpower limit. Similarly, while White House officials rejected ground operations in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Westmoreland wanted the U.S. to have the option of conducting operations in other countries. He wanted the U.S. to raid North Vietnam above the DMZ the following year and he was discussing with McNamara the possibility of ARVN conducting limited operations and raids in Laos which would hit North Vietnamese bases and munitions storage facilities. In Cambodia, Westmoreland was sensitive to the political problems there but believed there were “dozens even hundreds” of Viet Cong bases in the country. He did not recommend Cambodian operations but also did not want to rule them out.¹⁴

Other advisors wanted to pull back, but not out, for similar reasons. The U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, favored pulling back but wanted to make sure that the U.S. did not retract too far. He liked the idea of establishing a ceiling for U.S. forces in Vietnam, for example, but he wanted the administration to make it clear that the ceiling was not an end in and of itself. It was merely a signal to the rest of the world that the U.S. did not want to expand the war. For Bunker, fighting a limited war for limited objectives made sense, and he believed that the U.S. would not need more than 525,000 soldiers to accomplish its goals but, like Westmoreland, he wanted to be able to use more troops if North Vietnam or its allies made it necessary. For the same reasons, Bunker did not want the administration to make a statement committing the U.S. to forego operations beyond South Vietnam’s borders; he felt it would be best to “keep [the enemy] guessing” and he supported Operation Southpaw which called for U.S. Special Forces to lead ARVN raids into Laos. He also favored reducing America’s military commitment by turning more of the combat operations over to South Vietnam but felt the U.S. would have to go slowly in order for South Vietnam to build up its political and military capabilities. Moreover, in any announcement about

¹⁴ Memo, Walt W. Rostow to the President, 20 November 1967, #38, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

giving more responsibility to South Vietnam, he wanted the administration to avoid giving the impression that the U.S. was pulling out and abandoning South Vietnam or that the U.S. was relaxing its efforts to conclude the war as quickly as possible. In other words, Bunker wanted to pull back without appearing to pull-out. Generally, therefore, Bunker refused to box the war into a time frame. The U.S. had to be flexible and try to fight the war “with maximum imagination within accepted limits.”¹⁵

McGeorge Bundy, who was now president of the Ford Foundation, also wanted the U.S. to pull back without appearing to pull out and he opposed a bombing halt so the U.S. could avoid hoisting itself with its own petards. There was a high likelihood that the U.S. would have to resume bombing at some point, Bundy presumed, and, as Clifford had pointed out, once the U.S. stopped bombing, it would be difficult and “reckless” to start again. Protests would increase and be compounded by further losses due to North Vietnam’s improved defenses.¹⁶ Bundy thus argued that “if the pause is truly unconditional, the circumstances of any such resumption would be very damaging to us both at home and abroad.” Faced with greater or more effective forces from North Vietnam, the U.S. would either have to “accept continuing and visible reinforcement from the North without reply” or resume bombing “on our own say-so, thus ‘destroying the hope of peace’ by unilateral action.” By halting the bombing unconditionally, Bundy concluded, “we impale ourselves on a terrible dilemma.”¹⁷

For similar reasons, Bundy also opposed an extended bombing pause “for the sake of appearances.” Anything disguised as a pause, with conditions attached to it, was likely to provoke

¹⁵ Memo, Walt W. Rostow to the President, 21 November 1967, #36, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

¹⁶ Memo, Clark Clifford to the President, #12, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

¹⁷ Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 17 October 1967, #49a, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

“people like the New York Times.” Those critics would simply repeat their old reproaches that the U.S. was not sincere in its efforts for peace and that Hanoi had no reason to trust Washington. Moreover, Bundy explained, since “Hanoi will not accept any such conditional or limited pause, we can only get the worst of both worlds by offering it.” Once again, a conditional or temporary bombing halt meant to promote negotiations and end the war would backfire and undermine the United States’ bargaining power.

At the same time, while Bundy opposed a bombing halt, he also opposed escalation and any “headline-making intensification of the bombing” – especially any bombing of Hanoi. In large part, Bundy did not believe a strategic bombing campaign would be effective against North Vietnam. He still strongly supported tactical or precision bombing against communication lines and supply depots in the north, but he did not think North Vietnam was “a good object for a major strategic campaign.” He had also heard from intelligence staff that bombing Hanoi and Haiphong had “no significant effect whatever on the level of supplies that reaches the Southern battlefields.” Nor did any intelligence officer believe that strategic bombing would break Hanoi’s will. Tactical bombing, then, was good warfare and, in this case, Bundy thought good warfare was good politics. He noted that the strategic air war had “a military life of its own, with its own claimed imperatives. But it does not affect the real contest, which is in the South.” Unlike Clark Clifford, who viewed the fight against the Viet Cong and North Vietnam as part of the same war to preserve South Vietnam, Bundy regarded the war in the north as a diversion. The political costs of the air campaign were rising every week, Bundy claimed, and he affirmed that the U.S. had “everything to gain politically and almost nothing to lose militarily if we will firmly hold our bombing to demonstrably useful target areas.” There was nothing to gain, Bundy thought, by fighting by the rules of strategic air power.

The greatest opposition to this “desirable restraint,” came from some of the White House’s closest political friends but Bundy argued that Johnson had to distance himself from people like Stuart Symington (D-MO), L. Mendel Rivers (D-SC), James Harvey (R-MI), and Richard Russell (D-GA). In the past, the President had worried that his administration could not break with its political allies on the bombing issue, but Bundy believed that the balance of opinion was turning against bombing hawks. “They are overwhelmingly wrong,” Bundy declared, “and the belief that you are gradually giving in to them is the most serious single fear of reasonable men in all parts of the country.”

America was turning against strategic bombing – and Bundy was too. “I think that the bombing of the North is quite intense enough as it stands,” he told Johnson. This represented a very different attitude than the one that informed the firebombing campaign against Japan in World War II. The purpose of bombing Japanese cities in 1945 was to annihilate Japan’s capacity to make war and to inflict intolerable casualties so that Tokyo would sue for peace. Bundy’s comment reflected the fact that Rolling Thunder did not aim at either of those goals. The U.S. bombing campaign was only intended to make Hanoi’s support for the war in South Vietnam more challenging and costly. Furthermore, U.S. strategists in World War II had always talked about maximizing their bombing efforts, they never thought about stabilizing their sorties or campaigns as Bundy seemed to suggest. The bombing of Japan was “intense enough” when Japan surrendered.

Given that he did not recommend an unconditional bombing halt, nor strategic bombing, Bundy argued that one way for the U.S. to extract itself from such a predicament and avoiding hoisting itself with its own petard was to bomb North Vietnam in a more moral way. Bundy thought the administration should study the “possibilities for continuous bombing in the North which avoids startling targets and has the public effect of deescalation without seriously lightening the

burden on the North Vietnamese.” By continuing to bomb North Vietnam, the United States could maintain the pressure on Hanoi to negotiate and end the war but, by avoiding controversial targets that would arouse domestic criticism, the U.S. would appear to be curtailing the war. In effect, Bundy wanted it both ways, the “real military advantages of bombing,” *and* “seeming to exercise a new Presidential restraint.”¹⁸

Although none of Johnson’s advisors recommended pulling out of Vietnam altogether, no one called for all-out war either. Unconditional surrender, total victory, and unlimited war were all rejected by the White House and even General Westmoreland, who remained committed to military necessity, did not seriously consider escalating the war to World War II levels in Vietnam. Victory in Vietnam never demanded it because U.S. strategists never made total victory their goal. From the beginning of Johnson’s war, the President had determined to seek peace with honor, without victory, and all-out war had become anathema.

FEARS OF A WIDER WAR

Victory was also less valuable to Johnson’s advisors because they worried that the steps they would have to take to win would ignite a wider war – perhaps leading to World War III or a nuclear exchange. Thus, while many strategists opposed McNamara’s recommendations to pull back because they remained committed to containing communist aggression and saving South Vietnam, they agreed with some of his suggestions to limit the war in order to avoid a wider conflict.

As Secretary of State, Dean Rusk was especially sensitive to the international ramifications of American strategy. He, as much as anyone, worried about instigating another world war and strongly opposed U.S. ground operations against North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. No one knew where

¹⁸ Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 17 October 1967, #49a, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

the “flash point” was for Peking and Moscow and at what point they would become involved in the war, but Rusk speculated that an invasion of North Vietnam might induce China and the USSR to intervene. He accepted McNamara’s limited war for similar reasons and agreed that the U.S. should not attack Haiphong harbor or bomb irrigation dikes or civilian centers, although he did support bombing infiltration routes and battlefield areas.¹⁹

Where victory was not at stake, Westmoreland likewise tried to be sensitive to political and diplomatic considerations. For instance, although the General thought the U.S. should make the maximum effort to close the flow of supplies from Haiphong to the rest of North Vietnam, he and Ellsworth Bunker opposed mining the harbor because they believed the present efforts to isolate Haiphong were effective and they understood the risk of mining or attacking Soviet ships. The General and the Ambassador similarly advised against attacking irrigation dikes because they recognized that it would create huge political problems for the U.S.²⁰ In short, U.S. strategists agreed to continue limiting the war because they wanted not only to avoid a replay of World War II but also another Korean War. They opposed expanding the ground war into North Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia, and bombing Hanoi, Haiphong, irrigation dikes, or civilian centers because they worried that those actions might provoke China or the Soviet Union into sending their own forces to Vietnam.

WILL TO WIN

Many of Johnson’s advisors also opposed pulling back because they thought it showed that the U.S. did not have the will to win, and they worried that a lack of will would encourage North

¹⁹ Memo, Dean Rusk to the President, 20 November 1967, #14, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

²⁰ Memo, Walt W. Rostow to the President, 20 November 1967, #38, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL; Memo, Walt W. Rostow to the President, 21 November 1967, #36, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL. Westmoreland also was not sure the Air Force had the capability to destroy dikes.

Vietnam and make U.S. objectives even more difficult. Clark Clifford, for example, understood that the war was a contest of political wills, not just military capabilities, and he argued that, despite North Vietnam's weaker military, "Hanoi [was] depending upon a weakening of the will of the United States to carry on the war." The Vietnamese communists had defeated the French by outlasting them and they believed the same would happen against the United States. According to that logic then, Clifford argued that "Hanoi will never seek a cessation of the conflict if they think our determination is lessening. On the other hand, if our pressure is unremitting and their losses continue to grow, and hope fades for any sign of weakening on our part, then some day they will conclude that the game is not worth the candle." Moreover, because the United States was really fighting a war of wills, Clifford contended that it was "grossly fallacious" to think that the U.S. was fighting two wars – one in the north and one in the south. "They are part and parcel of our single effort to convince Hanoi that it must abandon its effort to conquer South Vietnam," he affirmed. The way to win the war, or at least to avoid losing, was to demonstrate America's unwavering will to win and make North Vietnam give up the fight first and Clifford thought McNamara's strategy would ultimately prolong the conflict – he claimed it would "retard the possibility of concluding the conflict rather than accelerating it." At bottom then, Clifford fundamentally disagreed with McNamara's underlying assumptions about the war, and he pointed out the plan's flaws by considering how Hanoi would interpret and react to American actions and commitments.²¹

To Clifford, a bombing halt suggested that the U.S. did not have the will to reach its goals and would only encourage Hanoi to hold out for victory. McNamara had argued that if the United States stopped bombing North Vietnam, Hanoi would begin talking. "I am at a loss to understand this logic," Clifford wrote. "Would the unconditional suspension of the bombing, without any effort

²¹ Memo, Clark Clifford to the President, #12, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

to extract a quid pro quo persuade Hanoi that we were firm and unyielding in our conviction to force them to desist from their aggressive designs?” No, Clifford answered. Hanoi would interpret the bombing halt as “evidence of our discouragement and frustration... an admission of the wrongness and immorality of our bombing of the North, and... the first step in our ultimate total disengagement from the conflict.” In short, a bombing halt would signal to Hanoi that Washington’s will was weakening which would strengthen North Vietnam’s morale and setback the determination of South Vietnam and America’s allies. It would also prove communist doubts that the United States did not have the stomach for war. As North Vietnam’s Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, had stated, “Americans do not like long, inconclusive wars; thus we are sure to win in the end.”

For the same reasons, Clifford denounced McNamara’s limited war strategy. If the U.S. adopted McNamara’s recommendations, the Johnson administration would have to publicly announce that it would not increase U.S. forces in Vietnam, that it would not call up reserves, that it would not expand the ground war into North Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia, and that it would not attack North Vietnam seaports, dikes, or locks. Above all, it would mean that the U.S. “would engage in continued efforts to restrict the war.” Once again, Clifford asked, how would North Vietnam react? “The chortles of unholy glee issuing from Hanoi would be audible in every capital of the world,” he exclaimed. Stabilization would not demonstrate American zeal or courage to stay the course, Clifford stated. “It would be interpreted to be exactly what it is. A resigned and discouraged effort to find a way out of a conflict for which we had lost our will and dedication.”²² Maxwell Taylor agreed. In addition to “all the liabilities” the President and his advisors had already discussed, Taylor thought a bombing halt or any kind of pull-back would embolden the enemy because

²² Memo, Clark Clifford to the President, #12, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

communist capitals would interpret retreat as weakness and that would make America's overall objective of an independent South Vietnam free from subversion even more difficult.²³

National Security Advisor Walt Rostow thought the risks of McNamara's strategy "might be worth taking" if it would "measurably increase the chances of a true settlement," but he too worried that Hanoi would interpret a unilateral bombing cessation and stabilization policy as "a mark of weakness rather than evidence of increased U.S. capacity to sweat out the war." Overall, therefore, Rostow wanted to "sweat out" (or bleed out) Vietnam by staying the course. The United States was making better progress than McNamara presumed and Rostow felt that progress would become clearer as time went on. He also pointed out that the opportunity to negotiate had occurred while the U.S. was bombing North Vietnam which suggested that bombing incentivized negotiations more than it deterred them. In his mind, and for many others, the best path to peace was the one the U.S. was already on.²⁴

PUBLIC OPINION

President Johnson and his advisors put so much faith in their will to win because they continued to believe in American military invincibility. As long as the United States remained committed to defending South Vietnam, North Vietnam could not win on the battlefield, they presumed. But since American military might made it impossible for North Vietnam to win in Vietnam, Hanoi planned to win the war in the U.S. As Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach explained, Hanoi used time the way the Russians had used terrain as Napoleon advanced on Moscow in 1812, "always retreating, losing every battle, but eventually creating conditions in which

²³ Memo, Maxwell D. Taylor to the President, 3 November 1967, #19, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

²⁴ Letter, Walt W. Rostow to the President, 2 November 1967, #3, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

the enemy can no longer function.” Despite winning his battles, Napoleon eventually lost because of “his long supply lines and the cold Russian winter.” In a similar way, Katzenbach argued, Hanoi hoped that the U.S. would ultimately lose the war because of “mounting dissension, impatience, and frustration caused by a protracted war without fronts or other visible signs of success; a growing need to choose between guns and butter; and an increasing American repugnance at finding, for the first time, their own country cast as ‘the heavy’ with massive fire power brought to bear against a ‘small Asian nation.’”²⁵

Thus, even though U.S. strategists believed the United States could not lose the war in Vietnam, Katzenbach insisted that the U.S. could lose the war at home – “The war can be lost in the United States,” he asserted. Katzenbach noted that Hanoi had considerable reasons to believe that Congress and public opinion “will not permit the United States to keep meeting immense costs in men, money, and – above all – severe internal divisions for many more months without an end visibly in sight.” Just like Japan in World War II, Hanoi believed that the visibility of mounting costs and the invisibility of success in Vietnam would lead the American people and their representatives to sue for peace short of their war aims.

Because Hanoi planned to win the war by winning on the American home front, Katzenbach contended that the military capabilities required for Hanoi to win the war were quite minimal and well within their capacity. Even if North Vietnam never won a battle, their forces could create the conditions for terminal dissension in the United States “merely by denying us crucial victories, inflicting (as well as taking) sizeable casualties and requiring us to maintain a large and expensive force in Viet-Nam.” In effect, Katzenbach argued that North Vietnam would beat the United States at its own game in fighting for negative victory. Hanoi could afford to lose battles and

²⁵ Memo, Nicholas deB. Katzenbach to the President, 16 November 1967, #13a, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

still win the war through denial – by simply refusing to give in to the U.S. Washington, in contrast, could not succeed in the same way because merely denying North Vietnam victory would not be enough to maintain the domestic support and morale necessary to hold the line against the enemy. In fact, Katzenbach asserted that “Unless we undertake a full-scale and unlimited war on the North – and almost certainly, even then – this will continue to be well within the DRV’s capacities for years to come.” In short, North Vietnam had the capacity and the will to maintain the war at a level that Americans would not match, and Hanoi would eventually prevail because the United States did not have the willingness to do what was necessary to win. Katzenbach claimed that even an unlimited war in Vietnam could go on for years but, if the United States was not willing to keep up the fight, then the Vietnam War was effectively unwinnable.

North Vietnam, on the other hand, would continue to fight, Katzenbach wrote, as long as its leaders believed that they could win the south. And they would continue to believe they could win the south, as long as dissension flourished in the United States. He further explained, “The additional costs we can still impose on North Viet-Nam without invading the DRV weigh far less in Hanoi’s scales than the value of continuing a fight which they believe we will be prepared to abandon relatively soon. Unless and until they are persuaded that we are not going to abandon Viet-Nam, they thus have little incentive for negotiation.” To put it differently, the United States could not get North Vietnam to stop fighting because Hanoi thought it could still win. The way to stop North Vietnam was to convince its leaders that they could not win the war. There were two ways to accomplish that – to compel Hanoi into abandoning its goals and strategies because it thought they were unattainable. First, the United States could exact costs for the war that North Vietnam could not tolerate or endure. By invading North Vietnam, destroying its industries and agriculture, strangling its economy, and killing its people, the United States could make the war so costly that Hanoi would determine that continued attempts to overthrow the south and unite Vietnam were

either unbearable and/or impossible. The second way to compel Hanoi to end the war and make peace short of its goals was for the United States to endure the costs of war beyond North Vietnam's capacity to exact. By continuing to fight, no matter the cost, and issuing public pronouncements to that effect, the U.S. could convince Hanoi that North Vietnam or the Viet Cong could never make the war costly enough for the United States to reconsider or abandon its goals and commitment to South Vietnam and, therefore, Hanoi's attempts to unite Vietnam were impossible.

The two strategies, exacting and enduring to win, were inverses of one another but they went hand in hand. The problem for the United States was that almost no one at the White House, the Pentagon, in Congress, or the country at large, was willing to pursue either of those strategies to their victorious end. As Katzenbach explained, the costs that the United States could exact of North Vietnam without invasion, civilian attacks, or nuclear weapons, were, in the minds of leaders in Hanoi, outweighed by the benefits of continuing the war. At present, the United States could not (or would not) exact sufficient costs to make Hanoi reconsider its war aims. At the same time, the U.S. could not convince Hanoi that it was willing to endure the costs of war. Escalation, additional troops, and determined rhetoric notwithstanding, America's limited war in Vietnam and dissension at home suggested to Hanoi that America's will to prosecute the war was fading, especially with an upcoming election that was likely to feature dozens of peace candidates. Although White House officials felt exasperated that Hanoi kept rebuffing offers for peace talks, Katzenbach correctly noted that Hanoi had no reason to talk about peace when they believed that they could oust the United States through grim endurance.

Even though the U.S. might weaken North Vietnam and the Viet Cong by committing more men and money to the war and "reducing our self-imposed restrictions as to how and where we fight," Katzenbach insisted that those means would not certainly achieve the desired ends. "What is

certain,” he wrote, “is that these actions at the same time increase the level of dissent at home and thus bolster the sole basis for Hanoi’s hopes.” If the United States tried to win in Vietnam, it would simultaneously lose the war at home because, as Katzenbach explained, any actions the United States took to stabilize or advance its efforts would “aggravate the four major grounds of domestic oppositions to the war in Viet-Nam.”

On the home front, more and more Americans were becoming less and less enthusiastic about the war for four reasons, according to Katzenbach. First, many Americans opposed the war because of the lack of progress or success. Katzenbach pointed out that the U.S. had established a goal which, “despite immense costs, we have not achieved after several years of effort and which we cannot prove we are in the process of achieving.” Many Americans therefore could see no “light at the end of the tunnel” and as long as the U.S. was not succeeding, the administration could never convince the country to stick it out in a losing cause in Vietnam. Others lamented that the war was diverting resources from better causes or more pressing domestic needs, like civil rights and the Great Society, while many felt frustrated that the U.S. could not overcome “an undesirable situation in a small, underdeveloped country.” Second, Americans opposed the war because they thought South Vietnam was a bad ally. Many felt South Vietnam was not bearing its share of the war’s burdens and they did not think it deserved U.S. support. Third, Americans opposed the war because the United States looked like the bad guy. Katzenbach observed that, perhaps for the first time in its history, the idealistic United States was playing the role of “the heavy” in Vietnam. The power disparities between the U.S. and Vietnam led many Americans to sympathize with the underdog. Others opposed America’s indiscriminate firepower and thought the Pentagon’s body counts showed that the U.S. was indifferent to the welfare and lives of the Vietnamese people. Fourth, Americans opposed the war because they feared World War III. As Katzenbach noted, many worried U.S. involvement would soon provoke Chinese or Soviet intervention and turn Vietnam

into another world war. Thus, while Americans opposed the Vietnam War for different reasons, all cases of dissension amounted to arguments against total victory and for limited war and, ultimately, peace.

Faced with a war in Vietnam that he felt the U.S. could not lose (but was making little and slow progress toward its goals) and growing dissension on the home front, Katzenbach recommended two strategies. In the first strategy, Katzenbach explained that the U.S. could increase its commitment of men and money in Vietnam “and reduce the restrictions on how and where we fight in an effort to score a quick ‘knock out’ of enemy forces in Viet-Nam before dissent at home – which will be greatly increased by these actions – becomes overwhelming.” The second option was for the Johnson administration to acclimate the country for a longer war by “gradually attacking the sources of... the growing opposition to the war.” In other words, the U.S. could either escalate and un-limit the war to pursue a more decisive and total victory *or*, the U.S. could try to make the home front more tolerant of the war by disarming the anti-war movement.

The first strategy, Katzenbach wrote, might “let off steam,” but he thought it would not achieve U.S. objectives. It would merely “reinforce dissent – and thus Hanoi’s hopes and determination – without destroying Hanoi’s ability to continue the war.” The U.S. should only consider expanding the war, Katzenbach concluded, if Washington reckoned that the U.S. could “destroy the enemy’s military forces, eliminate its infrastructure and destroy its will to persist well before American public opinion decides to wash its hands of the whole Viet-Nam problem.” If that was the case, Katzenbach thought the U.S. should give General Westmoreland a “carte blanche” and authorize him to extend the war into North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, “remove all target restrictions in the North, make an effort to increase other free world commitments in Viet-Nam,

[and] send US troops into the Mekong Delta in a major campaign.” The only limitations of the war would be those dictated by the danger of provoking Chinese or Soviet intervention.

That was, in effect, what Westmoreland wanted. As Katzenbach argued, the U.S. could not destroy the ability of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong to inflict heavy casualties and tie down large numbers of American troops as long as there was “a sanctuary in North Viet-Nam, a reserve of 400,000 troops, and a willingness of Communist allies to provide material support.” He continued, “if we cannot destroy the DRV’s capacity to continue fighting, it will be our democratic will to fight on – not Hanoi’s dictatorial will – that will suffer the harder blow. We will pay the costs of combining frustrated expectations of quick victory with heavy US losses both in men and in political support at home and abroad. Hanoi will at least enjoy the rewards of increased US dissent.” In short, the only way Katzenbach thought the U.S. could win the war outright, was to commit to total victory and do whatever it took to defeat communist forces, but he knew the American people were simply unwilling to pay that price in time and lives.

Katzenbach, therefore, favored the second strategy to accustom the country to a longer war and he called on Johnson “to restore the center position here in the United States.” He argued, “If we cannot destroy North Viet-Nam’s capacity to fight on without assuming unacceptable burdens and risks and if North Viet-Nam’s will to fight on will continue as long as domestic dissent grow – then surely the focus of our attention should be on the front at home.” By strengthening Americans’ will to fight a limited war in Vietnam, the Johnson administration could quash Hanoi’s hope that the U.S. would abandon the war before South Vietnam was “able to withstand Communist pressures on its own.”

To strengthen the domestic center and raise Americans’ willingness to meet the realities of limited war and slow progress in Vietnam, Katzenbach wanted to restate or redefine American

objectives, shift more of the war's responsibilities to South Vietnam, and make the war more palatable to Americans. First, Katzenbach wanted to redefine victory in Vietnam. Instead of fighting to eliminate the Viet Cong and convince North Vietnam to leave South Vietnam alone, Katzenbach wanted a more limited and attainable objective. The goal, he argued, should be to strengthen South Vietnam to the point that it could deal with the communist threat on its own. If the U.S. tried to solve the communist problem in Vietnam as General Westmoreland, Ambassador Bunker, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted, it could be "frustrated indefinitely by the enemy" – perhaps even if the U.S. fought an unlimited war. Progress would also be easier and more evident with a more limited objective, but also more morally tolerable. Success in destroying communism was measured in body counts while strengthening South Vietnam was measured by the growth of Saigon's capacity and the U.S. could strengthen its ally without occupying or destroying enemy sanctuaries in neighboring countries.

Redefining victory really meant limiting or reallocating the human costs for the same ultimate objectives in Vietnam and Katzenbach proposed to "progressively shift more of the weight of the war to the GVN." It was the only way to regain Americans' confidence in the war, he claimed, and even if "the aggressiveness of our pursuit of the enemy is somewhat reduced, that price is worth the benefits." Many dissenters, he continued, believed the U.S. should help South Vietnam resist communist aggression, but they wanted the U.S. "to assist, not to do the job for the Vietnamese," and they resented the fact that American casualties consistently exceeded ARVN's. Moreover, if ARVN was unwilling to fight for their own country, why should the United States have to pick up the slack? Katzenbach further noted that South Vietnam's political problems made Americans question whether "we are now throwing good money after bad and wasting American lives on a sure loser." South Vietnam's weaknesses and failures, in short, had made Americans less willing to pay the price of victory.

At the same time, while Katzenbach wanted South Vietnam to bear more of the war's burdens, he thought the U.S. needed to give more attention to the military's impact on South Vietnamese civilians. He questioned whether military gains outweighed the political losses when operations caused civilian casualties and created refugees, but when military actions also cost the administration domestic support, Katzenbach was positive that military success was not worth it. "Rightly or wrongly," he wrote, "too many people are appalled by the brutality of the war. They feel that to fight a war of insurgency with vastly superior fire power is immoral and counter-productive." When the U.S. destroyed Vietnamese villages and hamlets with artillery and air power, their forces might kill Viet Cong, but they also demolished homes, killed civilians, and devastated the landscape. To many Americans, the collateral damage exceeded, by far, the intended purpose and benefits of the attack. The moral accusations against U.S. forces included "a traditional sympathy for the underdog," Katzenbach acknowledged, but Americans were also horrified that the United States would eradicate a thatched hut or primitive hamlet with bombs or flamethrowers, simply because they suspected a few Viet Cong might be inside. Others, inside and outside the U.S., suspected that the United States lacked moral perspective in a war against non-whites.

To date, the Johnson administration had justified American brutality by calling attention to Viet Cong terrorism, but saying the enemy had done it first or worse would not hold up in the court of public opinion. For one thing, Katzenbach noted, "Americans put, and should put, higher standards on their own conduct than they do on that of other people." Secondly, Katzenbach argued that "terrorism is more acceptable as a technique of revolution than of government." The French Resistance, the Algerian NLF, and the Hungarian revolutionaries had all won widespread support in spite of their methods. "What was morally reprehensible was the overpowering reaction of the legitimate government in each case," Katzenbach wrote; "Hungarian students who threw home-made bombs at Soviet tanks were heroes, not villains." Katzenbach made it clear that he did

not equate the United States with the Nazis or the Soviets, but he admitted that the U.S. shared the same stigma. Because of the disparities in power between the U.S. and the Viet Cong, the United States looked like the oppressor. Katzenbach explained that “for the first time in our history, the United States is cast in the heavy role and this makes many Americans feel uncomfortable.” By and large, Americans opposed hurting innocent people to kill some guilty ones. In other words, Americans did not think the U.S. could accomplish much good by doing evil.

To combat the stigma and shame that the U.S. had incurred as the “heavy” in the Vietnam War, Katzenbach suggested that the administration make it clear to the American public that the U.S. could achieve its goals “without massive destruction of North Viet-Nam, without significant ground operations in any of the present sanctuary areas, and without any further increase in troop strength.” Indeed, Katzenbach estimated that the U.S. could not reach its goals in Vietnam unless it restricted the nature and size of its operations. The U.S. had to fight a more limited war because the American people would not stand for a war for total victory, one that cost so many lives, and one that risked a wider conflict. A limited war also meant matching U.S. commitments to its rhetoric. Katzenbach complained that “Almost every time there has been a public statement which suggested limitations, those limitations have been overtaken by events.” How sure were the American people that the Johnson administration did not want to invade North Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia, he asked. Did they fully understand that the U.S. would not “destroy North Viet-Nam by indiscriminate bombing,” that they would not mine Haiphong Harbor, attack Soviet ships, or bomb Chinese airfields? Katzenbach thus wanted the administration to not only live up to its commitments but prove to Americans that the United States was not the bad guy in Vietnam. It had to show that the U.S. was following moral restraints and that its military operations were absolutely necessary. In that way, the administration could match military realities to public opinion and fight the more limited and ethical war that the American people demanded.

To that end, Katzenbach thought the administration needed to reexamine its bombing policy. “We pay a huge price for our bombing policy at home and abroad with very little to show for it in South Viet-Nam,” he wrote. Air power advocates claimed that the future payoff would make bombing’s small price worthwhile in the end, but Katzenbach thought its value was “dubious” and the benefits would always remain in the future. He further affirmed that “Nobody really believes that the war can be won with bombs in the North,” but the U.S. could certainly lose the war with bombs because the policy was becoming impossible to justify. The longer the war lasted, the more pressure the U.S. would face to bomb more and more sensitive targets. As a result, Katzenbach explained, “More people will be killed; more pilots will be lost; more headlines will be made; more defections from our policy will take place. The war will continue to escalate when exactly the opposite should be our objective.” The original purpose of the bombing was to punish North Vietnam for its aggression and make its support for the Viet Cong intolerably costly, “But, is there any evidence that this is the price they are unable or unwilling to pay?” Katzenbach asked. He did not have any qualms about bombing Viet Cong supplies or troop concentrations from the north because those targets were “related to the big war” and did not face the same levels of domestic and international criticism. In short, Katzenbach agreed with the principle of strategic bombing – the U.S. had the right idea in exacting a price of the enemy that would exceed the benefits of their war effort. But he argued that bombing was backfiring because the domestic political costs of destroying the Paul Doumer Bridge,²⁶ for example, which connected Hanoi and Haiphong across the Red River, outweighed the military benefits because of the headlines the bombing made. U.S. bombing policy also did not seem credible in light of the administration’s stated objectives. U.S. officials always claimed that the U.S. did not seek to destroy North Vietnam, but aerial photographs showed residential destruction in the North, and continual bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong came

²⁶ Now known as Long Biên Bridge.

“perilously close to straight population bombing,” Katzenbach wrote. He therefore made a case for a “qualified, but indefinite, halt in the bombing” in order to remove the moral stigma of American warfare. Katzenbach did not think a bombing halt would lead to negotiations, but he felt the threat of renewing the bombing might be worth as much as the fact. At a minimum though, he wanted to avoid bombing Hanoi, Haiphong, “and other glamor targets” like thermal power plants which accomplished little, destroyed much, and made all the headlines. Overall, Katzenbach concluded that “the danger of loss of political support for the war by curbing the military is much less than the confidence which would be restored to the middle. And, in my judgment, those who press for a military solution are never going to be satisfied anyway.”

For Katzenbach, the key to victory in Vietnam was to maintain popular support for a long and costly war or to achieve American objectives before public opinion forced the U.S. to quit fighting. “Can the tortoise of progress in Viet-Nam stay ahead of the hare of dissent at home?” he asked. By the end of 1967 it looked like American progress in Vietnam would be “steady but undramatic” during 1968. But even if the U.S. removed “the limits we have imposed on how and where we fight, there is little reason to believe that the end of the road would be significantly nearer.” However, an unlimited war would undoubtedly increase dissent at home and encourage Hanoi’s hopes for an early American withdrawal. Winston Churchill had once observed that in conventional wars “nothing succeeds like excess,” but Katzenbach argued that expanding America’s commitment would not shorten the war and would likely lead to failure, not success. Thus, he contended that “If we can’t speed up the tortoise of demonstrable success in the field we must concentrate on slowing down the hare of dissent at home.”

To slow or overcome domestic dissent, Katzenbach proposed clarifying U.S. objectives; in fact, he suggested that the solution to the entire quagmire was to redefine America’s purpose in

South Vietnam. He insisted that America's current military mission overshoot their "real objectives" in Southeast Asia. Instead of trying to force North Vietnam to stop its support for the Viet Cong and trying to decisively defeat North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam as NSAM 288 outlined, Katzenbach called for new goals. The United States' true objective in Vietnam should be "to provide the military cover and non-military assistance needed to enable the GVN to grow in capacity and popular support to the point where it can survive and... deal with what will remain a continuing and serious Communist problem." Given the current objectives, Katzenbach admitted, "I would follow the same strategy as General Westmoreland." But unless the U.S. adjusted its goals and let Westmoreland "off the hook," the military would continue to request the "thin edge of the wedge" and expand the war. Guided by the new objectives, U.S. field commanders and Ambassador Bunker could adjust their strategies and tactics accordingly and Katzenbach expected that the new approach would minimize American involvement, civilian casualties and refugees, and end the military's never-ending requests to expand the war into North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The new objectives would also demand more of ARVN and South Vietnam and Katzenbach even suggested that the Johnson administration tell Thieu and Ky that there were "time limits on our commitment at its present level" and that South Vietnam better prepare to manage their own house. At the same time, Katzenbach wanted the U.S. to stop bombing targets in Hanoi and Haiphong in order to "bring our target system into line with our objectives... [and] avoid targets which raise doubts as to our often stated position that we are not seeking to destroy the DRV." To tie all of these steps together, Katzenbach wanted to develop a public posture that would rebuild "the confidence of the American center in our objectives and methods in Viet-Nam." Through major statements by Johnson, Westmoreland, and other advisors, the administration could highlight their recent progress while Thieu and Ky could publicly emphasize the responsibility of South Vietnam. The administration's rhetoric could then be backed up by U.S. actions in Vietnam which would

restore the country's confidence in the Johnson and the war effort and slow the pace of dissent against the war.²⁷

Other strategists agreed that the Johnson administration needed to elevate popular support in order to stay the course in Vietnam. As McGeorge Bundy explained, the administration either needed to achieve better or more success (they were working on that), or it needed to make success more visible or believable. Bundy reminded Johnson that “we are in a long, slow business in which we cannot expect decisive results soon,” and he contended that the U.S. was making more progress than the public gave them credit for. But the administration suffered from a “credibility gap” and, no matter how effective U.S. strategies were, the administration would never enjoy public support if no one believed the White House's claims of success. “We do not gain with the mass of the people by what we report of progress in Vietnam,” Bundy wrote, and he opposed any elaborate efforts by the administration to prove “by new facts and figures that we are ‘winning.’” Instead, Bundy wanted the press to close the White House's gap. “What we desperately need is that the newspaper men should begin to find progress for themselves,” Bundy declared. “Joe Alsop, with all his weaknesses, is worth ten of our spokesmen,” he said referring to the hawkish Washington journalist. The administration's reticence might cost it some headlines and “a few unbalanced television news reports,” but Bundy thought it would help the administration replenish its mandate in 1968.²⁸

Abe Fortas, however, took a more elitist view altogether and insisted that public opinion did not matter. In fact, he argued that the fundamental problem with McNamara's strategy was that it was based “almost entirely, upon an assessment of U.S. public opinion” and a false evaluation of popular support for the war. “I am in total disagreement,” Fortas declared. “We should not assume

²⁷ Memo, Nicholas deB. Katzenbach to the President, 16 November 1967, #13a, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

²⁸ Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 17 October 1967, #49a, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

that the American public are unwilling to sustain an indefinitely prolonged war,” he asserted (although what citizenry have ever been willing to support a war indefinitely?) Nevertheless, Fortas thought most Americans still supported the war and, even if they did not, Fortas did not think it would be “either honorable or sensible for the administration to acquiesce in this and to base military decisions upon that assumption unless and until the people through Congress or the polls make it impossible for this administration to do what it considers to be right in the national interest.” Fortas continued, with considerable emphasis:

Our duty is to do what we consider right – not what we consider (on a highly dubious basis with which I do not agree) the ‘American people’ want. (I repeat that I believe they do not want us to achieve less than our objectives – namely, to prevent North Vietnamese domination of South Vietnam by military force or subversion; and to continue to exert such influence as we reasonably can in Asia to prevent an ultimate Communist take-over.)²⁹

For Fortas, effective leadership meant doing what was right, whether the public knew it or not. He also insisted that most Americans actually agreed with the administration and wanted the U.S. to achieve its goals in Vietnam and that critics of the war constituted merely an angry minority. He seemed unmoved by protests and the anti-war movement and thought the administration should respond to majority opinion (who agreed with government policies), rather than critics. Fortas even suggested that the administration should continue the war and pursue what they thought was right until the people or their representatives forced them to stop. Finally, Fortas implied that public opinion did not matter because most Americans were not willing to pay the price that American goals demanded. He maintained that most ordinary Americans wanted to stop communism and defend Asia but “without inflicting or receiving the wounds of battle.” They wanted to defeat communism but did not want to exact or endure the losses necessary to do so. In other words, Americans wanted cheap victory – maximum results or benefits at minimum cost. In his own mind, victory was the most important objective in Vietnam and Fortas believed the United States should

²⁹ Comments, Abe Fortas, 5 November 1967, #11, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

pay the price necessary to contain communism and preserve South Vietnam. The fact that the public lacked the willingness to pay that price did not make America's goals any less right. Domestic support, therefore, was superfluous – if the American people did not know what was right in Vietnam the administration would have to fulfill its goals *in spite* of public opinion, rather than because of it.

Fortas, Dean Rusk, and Maxwell Taylor also agreed that a bombing halt would not do any good at home either. If the purpose of McNamara's strategy was to reassure Americans that the administration would not expand the war, then Fortas argued that "Its domestic good-effects would be illusory." He insisted that a bombing halt would satisfy neither the dove leaders who wanted the U.S. to abandon its objectives in Vietnam and Asia altogether, nor the masses who *did* want the U.S. to achieve its objectives.³⁰ Rusk likewise argued that an extended bombing pause would not change anyone's mind. It would not convince Hanoi to negotiate or end the war and, for doves back home, "no pause would be long enough."³¹ Meanwhile, Taylor admitted that McNamara's strategy would allay domestic fears about the war's expansion, but he also thought it would also give "fresh ammunition" to the larger number of critics on either extreme who believed that the U.S. was fighting "an endless and hopeless struggle" or that the U.S. was "really not trying to win." Decreasing American efforts would nullify the progress the U.S. had made and simply renew cries from impatient citizens to escalate or withdraw altogether, the very things McNamara's strategy aimed to avoid.³² However, Rusk did think that the U.S. should take the drama out of bombing by cutting back operations in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. Ultimately, he wrote, U.S. strategy boiled down

³⁰ Comments, Abe Fortas, 5 November 1967, #11, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

³¹ Memo, Dean Rusk to the President, 20 November 1967, #14, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

³² Memo, Maxwell D. Taylor to the President, 3 November 1967, #19, "McNamara, Robert S. – SEA," Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

to two considerations. Rusk explained, “Politically, we should avoid the impression of continuous escalation; militarily we should weigh military advantage against military losses.” For the sake of public opinion, Rusk agreed with McNamara that the United States should at least avoid the appearance of evil and make it look like the U.S. was not escalating the war. Militarily, however, he wisely suggested that the U.S. balance military benefits against their costs.³³

Conclusion

The President studied the situation in Vietnam and McNamara’s memo intently. He asked his advisors for their written reactions, consulted with Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland, and then had a group of senior advisors attend a long briefing at the State Department before meeting with them for a discussion.³⁴ Ultimately, Johnson sided largely with Walt Rostow and decided to stick it out in Vietnam.

The President wanted to strike targets in North Vietnam with “significant military content but which would not involve excessive civilian casualties, excessive U.S. losses; or substantial increased risk of engaging the USSR or Communist China in the war.” He also wanted to “remove the drama and public attention” that bombing North Vietnam engendered. At the same time, Johnson concluded that “a unilateral bombing stand-down would be read in both Hanoi and the United States as a sign of weakening will.” He therefore determined that a bombing halt “would encourage the extreme doves; increase the pressure for withdrawal from those who argue ‘bomb-or-get out’; decrease support from our most steady friends; and pick up support from only a small group of moderate doves.” Johnson did not want to rule out “playing our bombing card” in circumstances where it might move the conflict towards peace, but the opening of negotiations – at

³³ Memo, Dean Rusk to the President, 20 November 1967, #14, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

³⁴ Memo, LBJ to Himself, 18 December 1967, #1a, “Vietnam, Conduct of War in,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

a time when the north was being bombed – did not suggest that a bombing halt would be as profitable as McNamara suggested.³⁵

As for stabilization and a more limited war, Johnson saw no reason to increase U.S. forces in Vietnam but he resisted establishing public troop ceilings because he thought it would have the same effects of a unilateral bombing cessation. The President also felt “extremely reserved” about sending U.S. forces “across the frontiers of South Viet Nam” because of the political risks involved and the fact that such operations would divert forces from pressuring the Viet Cong and pacifying the Vietnamese countryside.³⁶ He also agreed to review the conduct of military operations in South Vietnam “with a view to reducing U.S. casualties, accelerating the turnover of responsibility to the GVN, and working toward less destruction and fewer casualties in South Vietnam.”³⁷

Overall, though, Johnson felt concerned that no military or civilian official had developed “a program to accelerate momentum in the South.” The President believed that “we are basically on the right track” but progress was so slow that he felt there *had* to be ways to use Vietnamese and American resources more effectively to defeat the insurgency in South Vietnam.³⁸ The discussions about U.S. strategy in Vietnam at the end of 1967 showed that some strategists like Abe Fortas, Clark Clifford, Ambassador Taylor, and General Westmoreland remained committed to the original U.S. goals in Vietnam and wanted to stay the course. Others, like Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Ambassador Bunker wanted to pull back even though they did not want to pull out of

³⁵ Letter, President to Robert S. McNamara, 6 November 1967, #9, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL; Memo, LBJ to Himself, 18 December 1967, #1a, “Vietnam, Conduct of War in,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

³⁶ Letter, President to Robert S. McNamara, 6 November 1967, #9, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL; Memo, LBJ to Himself, 18 December 1967, #1a, “Vietnam, Conduct of War in,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

³⁷ Memo, LBJ to Himself, 18 December 1967, #1a, “Vietnam, Conduct of War in,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

³⁸ Letter, President to Robert S. McNamara, 6 November 1967, #9, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL; Memo, LBJ to Himself, 18 December 1967, #1a, “Vietnam, Conduct of War in,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

Vietnam completely, while Nicholas Katzenbach suggested redefining American goals altogether. Everyone from the President on down, however, demonstrated that even limited victory was a tenuous objective, and no one wanted all-out war. No one had given up and wanted to withdraw, but even those who wanted to stick it out recognized that escalation would not necessarily give the U.S. what it wanted. In fact, most advisors thought escalation would deepen the quagmire, risk more American and South Vietnamese lives and a wider war, and strengthen dissent at home. Johnson opted to stay the course, but the top-level memorandums illustrated that, by the end of 1967, U.S. strategists valued victory less, cared more about American and Vietnamese lives, and were less willing to pay the price of their objectives than when the war began. The rest of the country was turning against American goals and strategies as well and in 1968, events threatened to push Americans toward peace at any price.

Peace With Honor

Richard Nixon entered the White House in January 1969 determined to end America's involvement in the Vietnam War while still preserving South Vietnam's sovereignty and self-determination in hopes of establishing a lasting peace in Indochina, the Pacific, and the world. Nixon, in short, wanted to reverse the results of Lyndon Johnson's policies in Vietnam, who had responded to every confrontation or threat with more force. Johnson's escalation meant that with every passing year the United States became more involved, more invested, and more stuck in Vietnam. By 1969, the Vietnam quagmire had killed more than 30,000 Americans, cost Johnson his presidency, and threatened to tear the United States apart. Faced with an intractable conflict that the U.S. seemingly could not win, Nixon resolved to end America's participation in the war by pursuing peace with honor, which eventually meant escaping Vietnam at any price.

For President Nixon, peace did not simply mean an end to the war. Rather, he emphasized what he called "peace with honor" which meant peace on terms acceptable to United States as opposed to "peace with dishonor" or "peace with surrender." In effect, peace with honor was an extension of Lyndon Johnson's peace without conquest. Like Johnson, Nixon's version of peace without victory aimed to contain communism and guarantee the freedom, independence, and sovereignty of South Vietnam. Nixon wanted not only to prevent a communist takeover but to establish conditions by which South Vietnam could determine its own destiny without political or military interference by any foreign power. At the same time, peace with honor called for the withdrawal of American soldiers from Vietnam, the liberation of American prisoners of war, and a peace agreement that would end the war in Indochina. Only when these honorable terms had been met would the United States end its commitment in Vietnam.

To achieve peace with honor, Nixon claimed that the United States was willing “to take every reasonable step” to end the war in Vietnam.¹ His administration, therefore, applied a series of military and diplomatic strategies that became known as the Nixon Doctrine. On the diplomatic front, U.S. strategists negotiated with North Vietnam in Paris, openly and in secret, to establish honorable peace terms at the conference table. In the meantime, U.S. forces continued to wage a limited war against NVA and NLF forces in South Vietnam while bombing and rattling their nuclear sabers in North Vietnam through a strategy known as Madman Diplomacy. Fighting in the South aimed to contain communist aggression and convince North Vietnam that the U.S. could not be defeated while strategic bombing and nuclear threats tried to coerce Hanoi to make concessions at the conference table. In the event though, that the United States could not make an honorable peace through negotiations, the Nixon administration planned to establish acceptable conditions on the ground through Vietnamization. While the Johnson administration had escalated and “Americanized” the Vietnam War by sending more men, money, and materiel to South Vietnam, the Nixon administration planned to de-escalate and “Vietnamize” the war by gradually withdrawing American soldiers and training and equipping South Vietnamese soldiers to take their place. This way, the United States could leave Vietnam and end its commitment there even if it could not establish a peace agreement or an acceptable political solution for the Vietnam problem.

Vietnamization thus provided a way for the United States to maximize its objectives while minimizing its costs and, in that sense, it became another silver bullet for the Nixon administration which hoped to be able to achieve all of its goals without prolonging or exacerbating the war. The strategy did not change the moral dimensions of the war, however. Indeed, Vietnamization merely transferred the burden of killing and dying to South Vietnam. Gradually, though, the Nixon

¹ Richard Nixon, “Address Before the 24th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations,” September 18, 1969, APP.

Doctrine withdrew the majority of American soldiers, and led to discussions about peace plans that the Nixon administration proposed in 1970 and 1972. Nevertheless, U.S. strategists questioned whether the doctrine was working in the face of Hanoi's intransigence. After North Vietnam launched its Easter Offensive in the spring of 1972, Nixon and Kissinger responded with a strategic bombing, mining, and blockade program against Hanoi, Haiphong harbor, and other cities in North Vietnam. Despite the moral outcry, the administration justified the campaign because it aimed to force concessions from Hanoi and lead to peace with honor.

In August 1972, North Vietnam seemed to soften its approach in Paris and in October, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho reached an informal agreement to end the war. Buoyed by the prospects for peace and the announcement of a diplomatic breakthrough just before the presidential election, Nixon won a landslide victory over George McGovern and claimed to have secured a domestic mandate for peace. Armed with his mandate, Nixon proposed new terms which South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and Le Duc Tho both resisted. At an impasse, the United States pressured Saigon by threatening to negotiate alone and pressured Hanoi by launching the largest bombing campaign since World War II. The Nixon administration justified each of its strategies by claiming that they would lead to a more honorable and moral peace and, in January 1973, North Vietnam returned to the conference table and South Vietnam acceded to American demands. Kissinger and Tho soon reached an agreement to end the war and Nixon triumphantly announced on January 23 that the United States had won peace with honor.

Nixon and his advisors insisted, thereafter, that the United States had "won" an honorable peace in Vietnam because the Paris Peace Accords had ended the war throughout Indochina, released American prisoners of war and allowed U.S. troops to withdraw while preserving South Vietnam's self-determination. The Nixon administration lauded the peace agreement because it had

preserved American credibility, contained communism, ended the war quickly while saving American lives, and offered the chance for lasting world peace. In the end, Nixon and his administration lauded peace with honor as justified and moral because it made the Vietnam War worth the cost.

Despite Nixon's insistence on peace with honor, the peace agreement only provided terms sufficiently acceptable for the United States to wash its hands of Vietnam. The arbitrary talks had infringed on South Vietnam's sovereignty and, although Nixon and Kissinger promised to continue their economic support for Saigon and held out the chance that U.S. forces could return if North Vietnam violated the agreement (as expected), everyone privately assumed that American soldiers were gone for good. U.S. strategists thus regarded the peace settlement as a temporary agreement, rather than a permanent solution to the Vietnam problem and the final terms reflected American and North Vietnamese objectives and virtually sidelined South Vietnam. Peace with honor really just allowed the United States to save face as it left Vietnam and revealed that the Americans were willing to have peace at any price.

NIXON'S SPEECHES

Even before he took office, Nixon promised in his presidential campaign to end the war in Vietnam, secure the return of American prisoners, and establish the foundations for a generation of peace. He outlined the guiding principles for his approach to Vietnam in a major campaign address on March 7, 1968, in which he announced that the "number one issue of 1968 – the number one issue in the United States – and the number one issue in the world" was "the problem of order." By "order," Nixon really meant peace – "peace at home, and peace in the world." At home, Americans reeled from the violence and destruction of Watts, Harlem, Detroit, and Newark while abroad,

Americans continued to live with the tensions and threats of the Cold War. After a generation of wars in Europe, the Pacific, Korea, and now Vietnam, the United States still could not grasp peace.²

Nevertheless, even though the war in Vietnam had cost the U.S. mightily in lives, dollars, and in international and domestic harmony, Nixon affirmed that the war was worth the price because the Americans who were dying there were giving their lives for the cause of “checking” aggression and violence and finding lasting peace. But despite the nobility of the cause, Nixon still suggested that the U.S. could have ended the war sooner by using all of its powers right away rather than gradually escalating the war. Since Vietnam was “a war for people” rather than territory, Nixon claimed that the war could not be won “by military means alone.” To win the war, the U.S. needed to use all its non-military resources as well – diplomatic, economic, political, and psychological. Only by un-limiting its war effort could the U.S. achieve “the negotiated end of the war” that it sought – not a conventional military victory or unconditional surrender, but a “durable peace” in which South Vietnam’s right to self-determination was respected by all nations.

Unlike the World Wars, Vietnam was “not a war to end war” and the United States did not intend to abolish militarism or aggression. But Vietnam was still “a war to make a larger peace possible” and Nixon wanted to end the war quickly while also enabling the U.S. to secure peace in Asia and the Pacific for the remainder of the century. In World War II, Roosevelt and Stimson had determined that unconditional surrender was necessary to justify the sacrifice of American lives and Nixon similarly concluded that “Only if this war is ended in a way that promotes that larger peace, will the cost be justified.”³ But while Roosevelt and Truman had aimed to win World War II in order to win the peace, Nixon wanted to win the peace without winning the war. In Vietnam, therefore,

² Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks on the NBC Radio Network: ‘A Commitment to Order,’” March 7, 1968, APP.

³ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks on the NBC Radio Network: ‘A Commitment to Order,’” March 7, 1968, APP.

the United States wanted the benefits of lasting peace without having to pay the price of total victory.

Just over a year later, on May 14, 1969, now President Nixon spoke from the White House Theater and delivered his first presidential address on the Vietnam War to the nation. Nixon claimed Vietnam was “the most difficult war in America’s history” and “our most difficult and urgent problem” and stated that he had been looking for “a way to bring lasting peace to Vietnam” ever since he had assumed office four months earlier.⁴ As he often told the country in his national broadcasts on Vietnam, when Nixon left Washington in January 1961 after finishing his term as Eisenhower’s vice president, there were no American soldiers in Vietnam. When he returned to Washington as President in January 1969, there were 550,000 American soldiers in Vietnam.⁵ By that time, the United States had been fighting the Vietnam War for four years, 31,000 Americans had been killed, 300 were dying every week, hundreds of others were prisoners in North Vietnam, and 30,000 more Americans were being drafted every month. The training program for South Vietnam’s forces was behind schedule, no progress had been made in the peace talks in Paris, and the U.S. had no comprehensive peace plan, no plan to bring any Americans home, and no plan to end U.S. involvement in the war either. Vietnam was also causing deep divisions at home and criticisms from allies and adversaries abroad.⁶

Even before he was inaugurated, Nixon had launched “an intensive review of every aspect” of America’s Vietnam policy. His team, he claimed, had “accepted nothing on faith... challenged

⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” May 14, 1969, APP.

⁵ Nixon’s numbers fell between 540,000 (November 3, 1969; April 7, 1971) and 550,000 (January 25, 1972; March 29, 1973). For 549,000, see April 26, 1972.

⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” May 14, 1969; “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969; “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” April 7, 1971; “Address to the Nation Making Public a Plan for Peace in Vietnam,” January 25, 1972; “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” April 26, 1972; “Address to the Nation About Vietnam and Domestic Problems,” March 29, 1973, APP.

every assumption and every statistic,” systematically examined all of the alternatives and considered recommendations from critics and supporters alike. The review reportedly showed that North Vietnam was preparing for a new offensive, revealed a “gulf of distrust between Washington and Saigon,” and discovered that, in eight months of talks in Paris, none of the negotiations had directly discussed a final peace settlement. The most pressing reality though, was the presence of half a million American troops in Vietnam. The country could debate whether the United States should have entered the war at all and how the war had been fought, but “the urgent question today,” Nixon said, was “what to do now that we are there” while the most important question for the President was how to end the war on acceptable terms.⁷

Given the situation in Vietnam, many Americans thought the most important thing was to bring the troops home and they pressed Nixon to end the war immediately by recalling all American soldiers from Vietnam. Nixon admitted that withdrawal would be easy and politically popular. He could blame the warmonger Lyndon Johnson for America’s involvement and defeat, while making himself a peacemaker. Johnson’s war would become Nixon’s peace. However, the President insisted that immediate withdrawal would betray his responsibility as president. He had an obligation to future generations of Americans and he could not merely choose what would help him win the next election.⁸

Of course he wanted to end the war, Nixon declared, and he knew the American people wanted to end the war. The people of South Vietnam undoubtedly wanted to end the war too. But there was a right way and a wrong way to end the war and Nixon asserted that the right way to make peace was to end the war for good, “so that the younger brothers” of the soldiers now in Vietnam

⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” May 14, 1969, APP.

⁸ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” May 14, 1969; “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969, APP.

would not have to fight “another Vietnam someplace else in the world.” In short, peace was not merely a matter of ending the war, and the issue in Vietnam was not between peace and war. The issue was how to win an acceptable peace for the United States.⁹

The President explained in May 1969 that his administration had “ruled out” a “military solution on the battlefield” although he did not explain why U.S. strategists had given up on conventional military victory. But even though U.S. soldiers were not trying to win in Vietnam, the Nixon administration also ruled out “a one-sided withdrawal” because it would “amount to a disguised American defeat.”¹⁰ So, U.S. strategists had given up on victory but wanted to avoid defeat, where did that leave the United States in Vietnam?

Nixon called his solution “peace with honor.” He explained in his major speeches on May 14 and November 3, 1969, that the United States could not settle for an immediate peace and withdraw its forces unilaterally because it would risk the lives and government of the South Vietnamese, threaten American prestige, and jeopardize their hopes for lasting world peace. The U.S. had sent soldiers to South Vietnam in the first place in order to defend it from communist aggression. If Nixon pulled out the American defenders, the South Vietnamese would be massacred. Fifteen years earlier, the President recalled, when the communists took control of North Vietnam, they had murdered more than 50,000 people and sent hundreds of thousands more to die in slave labor camps. And just one year earlier during the Tet Offensive when communist forces had entered Hue, they slaughtered 3,000 civilians. If the United States abandoned South Vietnam now, Nixon warned, the atrocities in Hue could engulf the entire country. Nixon worried especially about the 1.5 million

⁹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” May 14, 1969; “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969, APP.

¹⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” May 14, 1969, APP.

Catholic refugees who had fled to South Vietnam when communists took over the north.¹¹ The United States had an even greater moral responsibility to live up to its promises and make sure that its own dead had not died in vain. America's involvement was not about "false pride or bravado," Nixon claimed; it was about having the integrity as a nation to defend its principles and meet its obligations.¹²

The United States would lose more than its integrity if it abandoned South Vietnam, though. Nixon warned that "the cause of peace might not survive" if the U.S. withdrew its forces. If the communists in North Vietnam took South Vietnam by force, their conquest would suggest that the U.S. could no longer credibly defend its interests and allies. The defeat of the United States would then embolden other aggressive communist leaders who preferred confrontation to negotiation and could lead to violence in the Middle East or Berlin, or anywhere where the United States was fighting to keep the peace. Apparently, Nixon had heard from other leaders in Asia that they would regard a unilateral American withdrawal from Vietnam as a threat to their own national security. Nixon thus suggested that America's credibility and capacity to achieve its goals in Vietnam was propping up the line of dominoes against communist conquest. The collapse of South Vietnam and American credibility would likely be followed by the collapse of Southeast Asia and the collapse of peace throughout the world.¹³ In short, Nixon concluded that immediate withdrawal and peace in Vietnam now would ultimately lead to more war and cost more lives later. If Americans wanted to live in a world where nations preferred negotiation to confrontation, then they had to prove that confrontation with the U.S. was "costly and unrewarding."¹⁴

¹¹ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," May 14, 1969; "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," November 3, 1969, APP.

¹² Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," May 14, 1969, APP.

¹³ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," May 14, 1969; "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," November 3, 1969, APP.

¹⁴ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," May 14, 1969, APP.

Immediate withdrawal was also unacceptable for U.S. strategists because they valued self-determination for South Vietnam more than peace for the United States. Nixon declared in May 1969 that the U.S. was fighting for self-determination which meant that “What the United States wants for South Vietnam is not the important thing. What North Vietnam wants for South Vietnam is not the important thing. What is important is what the people of South Vietnam want for South Vietnam.” The U.S. was willing to accept neutrality for South Vietnam if that is what its people wanted, but all South Vietnamese had to be allowed “full participation” in their political life without any force or intimidation. Accordingly, Nixon asserted that the United States was “prepared to accept any government in South Vietnam” resulting from “the free choice of the South Vietnamese people themselves.” The president also clarified that the U.S. did not object to reunification if the people of North and South Vietnam wanted a unified country, but the United States would not impose any form of government on South Vietnam or allow anyone else to do so.¹⁵

If the United States could have achieved its limited goals – self-determination for South Vietnam and an end to American involvement – through a formal negotiated peace settlement or a clear informal understanding with assurances, U.S. strategists would have done so.¹⁶ Nixon always claimed publicly to prefer negotiations rather than coercion or violence to get what he wanted, but the United States could not win an acceptable peace at the negotiating table. The president repeatedly insisted that everything was negotiable “except the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own future.”¹⁷

Every avenue that the administration explored, however, was blocked by Hanoi. Nixon’s private proposals were rejected, his personal overture to Ho Chi Minh was rebuffed, while the

¹⁵ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” May 14, 1969, APP.

¹⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” May 14, 1969, APP.

¹⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969; see also “Statement on United States Troops in Vietnam,” September 16, 1969, APP.

eleven private meetings Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge had with North Vietnam's chief negotiator led to nothing. Indeed, the president announced that the sum of America's peace initiatives had produced "no progress whatever... except agreement on the shape of the bargaining table." At every turn, Hanoi refused to consider any American proposals and demanded that the United States withdraw its forces immediately and unconditionally.¹⁸ For Nixon and his advisors, this was unacceptable.

The question remained: how could the United States best end the war? Once again, U.S. strategists found themselves looking for a solution – a silver bullet or shortcut – that would enable them to win an acceptable peace. They looked for something between total conventional military victory on the one hand that would contain or eliminate the communist threat, and a defeat, surrender, or withdrawal on the other that would sacrifice South Vietnamese sovereignty, American credibility, and world peace. Negotiations remained the preferred path to end the war and U.S. strategists never gave up on trying to talk their way to success, but with Hanoi blocking the way forward, the Nixon administration began searching for another solution. As the president explained in May 1969, just because there was no way to end the war easily and appropriately, that did not mean that the U.S. had "no choice but to let the war drag on with no end in sight." American soldiers had been "fighting and dying in Vietnam" for four years at the cost of 35,000 American lives so Nixon called for "new initiatives" to supplant "the old formulas and the tired rhetoric of the past." It seemed only fair that "When Americans [were] risking their lives in war... their leaders [should] take some risks for peace."¹⁹

¹⁸ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," November 3, 1969, APP.

¹⁹ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," May 14, 1969, APP.

NIXON'S ADVISORS

The day after his speech, Nixon briefed a joint meeting of the Cabinet and the National Security Council and summarized his objectives and some of the risks that he was willing to take in Vietnam. The President rejected unconditional surrender and total victory because they threatened to prolong the war, not end it. The end of World War II had been delayed by unconditional surrender, he explained, because “If the enemy knows there is no way out but military defeat, he has nothing to gain by offering a settlement.” In Vietnam, therefore, the United States had offered the communists a way out. The problem was that North Vietnam did not want peace. “They want South Vietnam,” Nixon declared. Thus, in order to attain peace without sacrificing South Vietnam, the U.S. had to do more than simply propose peace, it had to threaten North Vietnam to change Hanoi’s cost-benefit analysis – without, of course, fighting a protracted war. The President explained, “So if we are going to get genuine negotiations, just putting out a proposal is not enough. We needed to threaten that if they don’t talk they will suffer.”²⁰

To end the war on acceptable terms, Nixon wanted his administration to assume four positions in regards to Vietnam. First, U.S. officials needed to make it clear that the United States wanted peace. Second, they needed to convince the enemy that, if there was no settlement, the U.S. was willing to expand its military operations. By demonstrating their willingness to expand or escalate the war, they could show, third, that North Vietnam could not win “by sitting us out,” and fourth, that “they aren’t going to get what they want by erosion of the will of the U.S.” In other words, Nixon wanted North Vietnam to understand that the United States was committed to its

²⁰ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976, no. 25.*

goals and would not lose the will to win. As he put it, he wanted to show North Vietnam that Americans would “support a sound peace proposal and not peace at any price.”²¹

The Nixon administration also insisted that the U.S. had to ensure South Vietnam’s survival instead of simply abandoning the country in order to prevent a communist takeover. In a conversation in Bangkok with U.S. diplomats in July 1969, Nixon reiterated the international importance of securing peace with honor. He announced, “As I see it, the way we end Vietnam war will determine whether we can have viable policy in Asia – a settlement that will not be seen as U.S. defeat and will not lead to Communist takeover in a few years.” In withdrawing from Vietnam, “One could conclude that getting out of Vietnam any way would be best thing we could do. But – though everyone wants peace – the most detrimental effect of a Vietnam settlement would be a settlement that produced Communist victory in a few years.”²² This conviction relied on the same strategic and moral consensus as containment, anti-communism, and the domino theory that every president since Harry Truman had invoked to justify U.S. foreign interventions during the Cold War.

However, Under Secretary of State Elliot L. Richardson wrote to Henry Kissinger on October 27, 1969, and argued that the United States needed a cause greater than anti-communism and self-determination in order to justify continuing the war in Vietnam. The President was preparing to give a speech the following week (what would become known as the “Silent Majority” speech) and, as Richardson thought about the upcoming address, he thought Nixon needed to restate American purposes and plans in Vietnam. Most of all, Richardson kept returning to what he called “the pivotal question: why are we justified in calling for additional sacrifices of American lives and the continuing diversion of American resources for something less than victory but short of defeat?” Americans had been willing to sacrifice lives and livelihoods to save the world from

²¹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976, no. 25.*

²² *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970, no. 102.*

German Nazism and Japanese militarism in World War II but they seemed far less willing to sacrifice soldiers and resources in Vietnam. In light of the public mood, Richardson argued that the U.S. had to fight for something more important than self-determination. He explained, “It is not enough, I believe, to point to the goal of self-determination for the people of South Viet-Nam,” nor was it sufficient to point to the insurgency that threatened South Vietnam. Lots of people around the world had their freedom and independence threatened by external sources. Why should the United States intervene and accept the human costs of war in this case and place?²³

For Richardson, the difference between South Vietnam and other places was that “we have made a commitment – a promise – to the people of South Viet-Nam to help them preserve the opportunity to determine their own destiny.” Americans had been contending for years about whether the United States should or should not be in Vietnam but Richardson suggested Nixon could disregard that debate. “Whether or not it was wise in the first instance for us to have undertaken such a commitment is not now in issue: the important fact is that we have undertaken it,” he wrote. By 1969 though, the U.S. had promised to defend South Vietnam so many times that it had effectively staked its entire international reputation there. Indeed, Richardson claimed that “upon our willingness to carry [its obligation] out depends the credibility of all U.S. commitments.” And upon the credibility of American commitments depended “the possibility of a relatively stable and peaceful world.” If the United States went back on its word and abandoned the people of South Vietnam, it risked not only “instability and war” but perhaps World War III. Therefore, Richardson insisted that if Americans were not willing to make the additional sacrifices necessary to fulfill “our irreducible minimum objective in South Viet-Nam,” they ran the risk of having to make “much greater sacrifices” in the future.²⁴

²³ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976, no. 42.*

²⁴ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976, no. 42.*

Nixon had made these points often, as Richardson knew, but he asserted that “they badly need restatement, particularly for the American people. For the real point of Viet-Nam is not Viet-Nam itself but our world-wide role.” By focusing on American honor, Richardson thought Nixon could connect the Vietnam War to a greater cause and could inspire Americans to make greater sacrifices. He wrote: “The capacity of the United States to honor its present undertakings is thus an earnest of its capacity to honor its future undertakings, including those which contribute to a more enduring peace. Our sacrifices in Viet-Nam can thus be seen as sacrifices for a larger cause.”²⁵

Henry Kissinger likewise claimed that containment was a treadmill policy and that if the United States was not going to simply walk out on South Vietnam, Americans needed a more galvanizing reason to wage war. Rather than offering a more inspiring or more grandiose vision of American destiny or policy, however, Kissinger shrewdly argued in a 1969 essay on American foreign policy that the Nixon administration needed to identify the national interests that were at stake in Vietnam. He deftly recognized that the nation’s moral mood had changed from idealism to interest and it was hard for Americans to justify fighting aggression when U.S. national interests were not at stake. Kissinger wrote, “The abstract concept of aggression causes us to multiply our commitments. But the denial that our interests are involved diminishes our staying power when we try to carry out these commitments.” The United States simply could not operate its global programs anymore, he continued, and that meant that Americans had to replace containment by developing not only new policies but new ethics. The U.S. needed a different creativity and patience and Kissinger explained, “Enthusiasm, belief in progress, and the invincible conviction that American remedies can work everywhere must give way to an understanding of historical trends, an

²⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976, no. 42.*

ordering of our preferences, and above all an understanding of the difference our preferences can in fact make.”²⁶

The United States would also have to change its values, not only to adapt to new international political realities but to suit new generations of Americans. Kissinger pointed out that American youth held different attitudes at the end of the Sixties than they had at the beginning. He specified, “The idealism of the fifties during the Kennedy era expressed itself in self-confident, often zealous, institution building. Today, however, many in the younger generation consider the management of power irrelevant, perhaps even immoral.” Because of the generation gap and these new ethics, Kissinger contended that U.S. foreign policy was divided between hawks who valued force and the results it could achieve, and doves who disdained force and emphasized appropriate means:

the American mood oscillates dangerously between being ashamed of power and expecting too much of it. The former attitude deprecates the use or possession of force; the latter is overly receptive to the possibilities of absolute action and overly indifferent to the likely consequences. The danger of a rejection of power is that it may result in a nihilistic perfectionism which disdains the gradual and seeks to destroy what does not conform to its notion of utopia. The danger of an overconcern with force is that policy-makers may respond to clamor by a series of spasmodic gestures and stylistic maneuvers and then recoil before their implications.

For Kissinger, the global youth revolution “suggest[s] a spiritual void, an almost metaphysical boredom,” that rejected American involvement in foreign affairs. Foreign crises were not likely to subside, in fact, Kissinger believed they would become more common if the United States was unwilling to get involved. “These difficulties are likely to multiply when it becomes apparent that one of the legacies of the war in Vietnam will be a strong American reluctance to risk overseas involvements.”²⁷

²⁶ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976, no. 4.*

²⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976, no. 4.*

During Nixon's first year in office, therefore, peace with honor did not mean peace at any price. The policy was a moderate path between total victory on the one hand and abject defeat on the other. The Nixon administration wanted to leave Vietnam to save American lives and resources and neutralize domestic and international condemnations, but U.S. strategists also feared that American withdrawal would lose the war, sellout their ally, and risk the immediate and long-term consequences of losing South Vietnam to communism. At the same time, the administration wanted to contain communism and uphold South Vietnam but did not have the stomach for protracted war and the indefinite casualties that victory would cost. U.S. strategists, therefore, determined to seek peace with honor in hopes of achieving all of their goals. Peace with honor meant keeping their promise to preserve South Vietnam's freedom, independence, and sovereignty, while maintaining America's credibility and international role.

The Nixon Doctrine

To achieve peace with honor, the Nixon administration introduced the Nixon Doctrine which prescribed a strategy cocktail comprising limited military operations and more unlimited threats, Vietnamization – involving both American withdrawals and the training and equipping of South Vietnamese forces – and peace talks with North Vietnamese leaders. The Nixon Doctrine took limited war for granted and ruled out military victory. At the same time, the President and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, used a series of subtle and overt nuclear threats – a strategy infamously known as “Madman Diplomacy” – in order to coerce Hanoi to negotiate and end the war on American terms. Meanwhile, Vietnamization was meant to remove American forces and strengthen South Vietnam’s so that the United States could reduce American casualties and end their involvement without jeopardizing South Vietnam’s self-determination. In that sense, Vietnamization represented another silver bullet – an attempt to save American lives and still win the war, maximum achievement at minimum cost.

Kissinger and other strategists doubted the efficacy of Vietnamization because they had doubts about the effectiveness of other strategies and South Vietnam’s ability to hold the line against communist aggression. De-escalation and withdrawal were also as slippery as the slope of escalation and once the United States started on the path towards ending the war, U.S. strategists questioned whether the Nixon administration would be able to reverse course if necessary. At the conference table, American negotiators hoped they could talk their way to peace with honor and, like Vietnamization, end the war and save lives on U.S. terms. Hanoi remained intransigent, however, and insisted that North Vietnam would win the war because the United States lacked the will to win.

Impossible and Immoral Victory

The United States also pursued peace with honor because U.S. strategists believed that military victory was immoral and impossible. When the Nixon administration arrived at the White House, the biggest problem facing the country in Vietnam was the lack of progress. The United States' military effort seemed to be going nowhere and, for Nixon and his advisors, Vietnam felt like a moral treadmill. No matter what they did, U.S. forces could not break through. More than twenty years earlier, Harry Truman had likened the United States to a fireman who could stamp out international blazes wherever and whenever they arose. But it did not seem to do much good or make much sense for the United States to continually put out fires if it was not willing to prevent or stop their cause. If the U.S. did not have the capacity, the stamina, or the will to defeat the communist arsonists running amok on the earth, then the United States should simply go home. The best decision in an unwinnable war was not to fight.

Some U.S. strategists refused to believe that the United States could not win in Vietnam with all of its military muscle, political clout, and technological advances. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, for example, insisted that North Vietnam had to have a breaking point. For strategists who thought that the U.S. could and should win in Vietnam, Johnson's mistake was not that he escalated the war, but that he did not escalate enough. Rather than gradually increasing American forces and finances, these hard-liners urged the commander-in-chief to use overwhelming force to compel North Vietnam to accept American terms (as the United States had against Germany and Japan in World War II). Of course, if America's numerical and technological advantages were enough to manufacture victory, the United States would have already won. Allegedly, when the Nixon team took office in 1969, military officials assembled all the data on North Vietnam and the United States – population, gross national product, industrial capacity, and the numbers of tanks, ships, and aircraft, anything that could be quantified – and entered all the

numbers into a big computer in the basement of the Pentagon. The officials then asked the computer to calculate when the United States would win the war in Vietnam. The computer crunched all the data and spit out an answer, “*You won in 1964!*” This “bitter little story” from Col. Harry G. Summers circulated among the U.S. Army in the closing days of the war and, although the tale is apocryphal, the “technological fanaticism” it conveyed was true.¹ U.S. strategists thought the American Goliath should have annihilated the Vietnamese David, but the computer could not account for national wills and other moral factors, and no matter how many bombs or bullets the U.S. sent, it all just sank in the Vietnam quagmire.² And even if the United States could force the surrender or defeat of its enemies, the time, money, and lives it would take to do so surpassed what nearly any strategist was willing to commit; nobody had the stomach for a long, bloody war. Nixon knew something had to change, but all the attempts to win the war on American terms had failed, so Nixon decided to quit the war on American terms. If the United States could not have victory, Nixon decided it could at least have peace.

To win in Vietnam the way the United States had won in World War II therefore would have required a massive escalation of the war – beyond anything the Johnson administration had ever done. The United States would have had to wage a more unlimited war involving more significant mobilization on the home front and more unrestrained operations on the battle front. In Vietnam, an unlimited war would have involved bombing dikes or using nuclear weapons and Nixon rejected both of those options as immoral strategies. Bombing dikes along the Red River delta would likely have killed one million Vietnamese and nuclear weapons would have violated the nuclear taboo. Nuclear weapons seemed disproportionate to the targets in Vietnam and would have incited

¹ Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 17; for another retelling see *The Vietnam War* (PBS, 2017); for a brief investigation of the story see Alexis C. Madrigal, “The Computer That Predicted the U.S. Would Win the Vietnam War,” *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2017.

² Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

worldwide outrage. Nixon later pointed out that the targets could be attacked with conventional weapons which meant that nuclear weapons were unnecessary and, therefore, immoral in Vietnam.³

U.S. strategists also decided that military victory was impossible. After returning from a week in South Vietnam on March 12, 1969, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird told Nixon that American leaders in Vietnam thought they could stop North Vietnam from achieving victory but could not prevail themselves in a limited war. He reported, "The uniform view of U.S. civilian and military leaders in Vietnam, of the CINCPAC staff, and of the GVN leadership is that we now have and can retain sufficient military strength to preclude the enemy from achieving any kind of military verdict in South Vietnam. At the same time, considering the restrictions with which we are compelled to operate in seeking our limited objectives, none of these men forecasts a military victory for U.S. and allied forces within the foreseeable future." He concluded that the U.S. military was making "Steady progress" in applying pressure to the enemy, but military and civilian leaders had reached a consensus that military victory in the next two years or more was "not feasible under prevailing constraints."⁴

In April 1970, just over one year later, Laird gave Nixon a similar report that concluded victory was impossible. The secretary explained that North Vietnam had suffered disastrous losses, "an estimated 800,000 dead or permanently disabled since 1960." And yet, North Vietnam still had the manpower to sustain that casualty rate "almost indefinitely" and could even absorb heavier casualties for many more years. Since the United States could not exact an intolerable level of losses on North Vietnam (at acceptable cost to the United States), Laird indicated that North Vietnam could likewise continue the conflict at its current levels indefinitely. He therefore reckoned, "Given

³ "A Nation Coming Into Its Own: What the President Saw," *Time* 126, no. 4 (March 29, 1985): 52-53.

⁴ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 38.

this situation and the intolerable costs and risks posed by a broadened general conflict, military victory in South Vietnam continues to be impossible.”⁵

Since the United States was not trying to achieve victory in Vietnam, the military’s role became ambiguous. General William Westmoreland reported that the Army’s goal was “to build a positive and effective defense capable of meeting any future contingency, and at the same time to carry on the war in Vietnam.”⁶ These goals were especially vague: defend against *any* contingency and to simply *carry out* the war. There were no plans for victory or even plans to establish conditions by which to achieve a political settlement. The army’s goal in Vietnam was merely to keep fighting and that meant killing Vietnamese.

VIETNAMIZATION (1969-1970)

Nixon tried to reverse the outcomes of the Johnson administration in Vietnam by changing U.S. policy “on both the negotiating front and battlefield.”⁷ While the Nixon administration continued to propose peace plans in Washington and discussed them in Paris, U.S. strategists also tried to end the war on acceptable terms by changing the ratio of responsibility between the United States and South Vietnam. Since the United States might not end the war on an acceptable basis at the negotiating table, Nixon elaborated on another strategy to achieve an acceptable peace on the battlefield, “regardless of what happen[ed] on the negotiating front.” The Nixon Doctrine, as the press called it, would rebalance the burdens of war by gradually withdrawing American soldiers as South Vietnamese troops assumed more military responsibilities. As the President saw it, “We Americans are a do-it-yourself people. We are an impatient people. Instead of teaching someone else to do a job, we like to do it ourselves. And this trait has been carried over into our foreign policy.”

⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 221.

⁶ Westmoreland, *Report of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army*, iv.

⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969, APP.

In Korea and in Vietnam, the United States had furnished most of the money, munitions, and men to help South Koreans and South Vietnamese resist communist aggression, and the U.S. was willing to accept those responsibilities when containing communism was the most important objective in foreign policy. But by 1969, those responsibilities in Vietnam felt like millstones and the casualties seemed too costly. Johnson's policy had assigned the primary defense and combat burdens to the United States but now the U.S. could not leave, even though Americans wanted to, because South Vietnam was not strong enough to defend itself. The Johnson administration had thus "Americanized the war in Vietnam" and now the Nixon administration wanted to Vietnamize the peace.⁸

Vietnamization was not Nixon's idea, though. The Johnson administration had long considered gradually withdrawing American forces and "Vietnamizing" the war to turn more of the burden over to South Vietnam, but Nixon was able to make it *his* policy during the 1968 campaign. In May of that year, Nixon delivered a campaign speech in Omaha in which he proposed a "new diplomacy" to deal with future aggression. He explained that, since World War II, the United States had become involved in two major wars – Korea and Vietnam – "to defend the freedom of other lands from Communist aggression." Between the two conflicts, the U.S. had suffered more than a quarter of a million casualties and fifty thousand deaths while providing most of the money, arms, and men. "The efforts that were made were right in my view," Nixon stated, "but I believe it is time now for a new diplomacy." In cases of future aggression, Nixon wanted the U.S. to help by supplying money and arms, "but we let them fight the war and don't fight the war for them."⁹

Going forward then, the United States would continue to "keep all of its treaty commitments," and would shield allies and countries vital to its national security from threats by

⁸ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," November 3, 1969, APP.

⁹ FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, *Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976*, no. 5.

nuclear powers. In other cases of aggression, the U.S. would provide military and economic aid in accordance with its promises but, in a modification of the Truman Doctrine, the threatened nation would take the primary responsibility for its own defense. After all, the president announced, “The defense of freedom is everybody’s business – not just America’s business.”¹⁰ During his presidential campaign, Nixon had maintained that the U.S. still had the “chief responsibility for keeping peace in the world” but he argued that the responsibility should be shared. Rather than “fighting the war for them” Nixon wanted the U.S. to help threatened nations “fight the war for themselves.” In effect, the U.S. would unshoulder some of the burden of containment to other nations who “must not be allowed to suppose that they can continue indefinitely to count on the United States for go-it alone protection.”¹¹

The U.S. had practiced Vietnamization for much of the year already. After Laird visited South Vietnam in March 1969, Nixon increased the training and equipment of South Vietnamese forces and, when the president himself visited South Vietnam in July, he made it the “primary mission” of American troops to empower South Vietnam to defend itself and reduced American air operations in Vietnam twenty percent. The results spoke for themselves. American soldiers were starting to come home. At the beginning of November, the president announced that by December 15 over 60,000 soldiers would be withdrawn from South Vietnam, including twenty percent of American combat forces. Because of the increased training and equipment, South Vietnamese forces would be able to take over combat duties from the departing Americans. Meanwhile, enemy infiltration had declined eighty percent in the last three months, in comparison with the same period in 1968, and American casualties had declined to their lowest point in three years. As long as South

¹⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969, APP.

¹¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks on the NBC Radio Network: ‘A Commitment to Order,’” March 7, 1968, APP.

Vietnamese forces grew stronger and the military situation progressed, American withdrawals could continue.¹²

If Nixon's silver bullet worked, Vietnamization would solve the United States' political and military dilemma; it would allow the U.S. to choose its benefits *and* its costs, and to achieve its goals at an acceptable price. Since an immediate withdrawal of all Americans from Vietnam was intolerable, the U.S. would continue to work for "a just peace" by negotiation if possible, or "Vietnamization if necessary." Although he admitted it was not the easy way to end the war, Nixon nevertheless insisted that it was right because it would not only end the war but profit peace – in Vietnam, the Pacific, and the world. An immediate withdrawal, in contrast, would destroy Americans' confidence in themselves. Certainly, Americans would be happy to have their soldiers home, but the longer consequences would bring remorse and recrimination, he claimed. Nixon wanted to end the war to save American lives, but he also wanted to end the war so that future Americans would not have to fight another Vietnam somewhere else in the world. The Nixon Doctrine was therefore supposed to end the war in Vietnam and prevent future Vietnams.¹³

Vietnamization would only succeed, however, if Americans kept the faith and remained willing to pay the price of war until South Vietnam could fight its own battles. Although Nixon acknowledged in November 1969 that many "honest and patriotic" citizens disagreed with his peace plans, he remained convinced that his opponents constituted only a shrill minority and he appealed to "the great silent majority" of Americans to uphold his program. The United States had become "the strongest and richest nation in the world" and the world's hopes for peace and freedom depended on "whether the American people [had] the moral stamina and the courage to meet the challenge of free world leadership." The President therefore pleaded for American Samaritans not to

¹² Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," November 3, 1969, APP.

¹³ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," November 3, 1969, APP.

pass by “on the other side of the road” and allow the hopes for peace and freedom “to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism.”¹⁴

Nixon appealed particularly to young Americans who were concerned about the war. The President claimed that he respected their idealism and shared their desires for peace. “I want peace as much as you do,” he declared. As President, he would have to sign eighty-three letters to the family members of Americans who had died in Vietnam that week and, while he was glad that the letters amounted to only a third as many as those he signed in his first week in the White House, he still claimed that he wanted nothing more than “to see the day come when I do not have to write any of those letters.”¹⁵

In his campaign, Nixon had promised to end the war and win the peace, and he argued that his plan would fulfill his promise with the support of the American people. “Let us be united for peace” and “against defeat,” he exhorted. Because, he argued, ultimately, “North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.” The end of the Vietnam War would not end all wars, but Nixon argued that his plans could provide “a just and lasting peace.”¹⁶

The long and the short of Nixon’s Doctrine, however, was that the United States was no longer willing to bear the burdens that it had assumed for much of the Cold War. For Nixon, Vietnamization meant that the U.S. was not going to carry the cross of containment alone any longer and that the U.S. was handing off the dirty work of killing and dying to South Vietnam. Of course, this rhetoric and the policy itself overlooked the reality that the South Vietnamese were already doing most of the killing and dying. The President defended the shift in strategy by claiming that “the job of keeping the peace [was] too large for the United States alone,” that self-

¹⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969, APP.

¹⁵ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969, APP.

¹⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969, APP.

determination could not exist without self-reliance and that, “by establishing new collective security systems, the total effective strength of the free world will be increased, and thus the communist powers’ temptation to launch new wars will be reduced.” But even if the shift equalized responsibilities without sacrificing America’s overall objectives, Nixon deceived himself by insisting that Vietnamization was “not a retreat from responsibility” nor a “new isolationism,” as he had stated in his campaign. Clearly, the policy showed that the United States was becoming less willing to intervene in overseas conflicts – the symptoms of what would soon be called the Vietnam Syndrome.¹⁷

Withdrawals

Above all else, ending America’s involvement in Vietnam meant withdrawing American soldiers from Vietnam. Since the 1950s, the United States had steadily increased its involvement in Indochina by escalating its commitment to South Vietnam. President Eisenhower had sent money and military equipment to help South Vietnam resist “a Communist takeover,” President Kennedy then sent 16,000 combat advisors to Vietnam in 1962. President Johnson sent the first American combat forces to South Vietnam in 1965 and U.S. forces had progressively increased until over half a million were stationed in Indochina by the time Nixon took office.¹⁸ President Nixon, however, wanted to reverse America’s pattern of involvement by de-escalating and withdrawing American soldiers which would help end the war and save American lives.

Withdrawals were also necessary for South Vietnam’s self-determination. As Nixon explained, the only peace settlement that the United States could accept was one that would permit the people of South Vietnam to determine their own political future and they could not freely choose without the withdrawal of all foreign forces from South Vietnam – both American and

¹⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks on the NBC Radio Network: ‘A Commitment to Order,’” March 7, 1968, APP.

¹⁸ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969, APP.

North Vietnamese. To implement an acceptable peace, therefore, Nixon reaffirmed his willingness in May 1969 to withdraw all U.S. forces “on a specified timetable” and asked only that North Vietnam withdraw its forces according to that timetable as well. The United States and North Vietnam would thus withdraw their forces quickly, simultaneously, and on a mutually acceptable basis. Nixon’s basic peace plan thus called for the “mutual withdrawal of non-South Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam and free choice for the people of South Vietnam.” The President believed that the United States could not demand anything less in the interest of long-term peace, and no more considering the military realities in Vietnam.¹⁹

Withdrawals were also essential to Vietnamization. As South Vietnamese forces received more training and equipment and, as they assumed more of the combat burden, American soldiers could go home. The Nixon administration intended the two thrusts of Vietnamization to go hand in hand but, if the overall objective was to guarantee South Vietnam’s sovereignty without paying for it in American lives, then the training programs for ARVN had to take precedence over American withdrawals. U.S. forces could not leave if South Vietnam was not prepared to take full responsibility for its national defense. In contrast, if the Nixon administration simply aimed to end American involvement, regardless of the consequences for South Vietnam, then withdrawal would become an end in and of itself.

Nixon approved the withdrawals of American soldiers as the United States made progress towards peace. In June 1969, he authorized the removal of 25,000 troops because of the progress of the training and equipment programs for South Vietnamese forces, improvements in the peace talks, and the diminished levels of enemy activity.²⁰ In other words, the Nixon administration predicated

¹⁹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” May 14, 1969,” APP.

²⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks Following Initial Meeting With President Thieu at Midway Island,” June 8, 1969, APP.

the end of America's involvement in Vietnam on the progress of negotiations, Vietnamization, and pacification of the enemy through limited war.

Over time, therefore, withdrawals progressed hand in hand with other American means, but they eventually came to represent progress towards peace on their own. For example, in December 1969, when Nixon announced the removal of a further 50,000 soldiers by April 15, 1970, he did so solely on the progress of Vietnamization since he admitted that the U.S. had made "no progress whatever on the negotiating front" and enemy infiltration in South Vietnam had "increased substantially."²¹ On April 20, 1970, five days after the 50,000 were supposed to have come home, Nixon announced the withdrawal of another 150,000 Americans since Vietnamization was going well, the U.S. had made "significant advances" in pacifying enemy forces, and American casualties had declined; even though the talks in Paris were still stalemated and North Vietnam had expanded its offensives to Laos and Cambodia.²²

Nixon's withdrawals also made the end of America's involvement in the war seem inevitable as his administration relentlessly pulled Americans out of Vietnam, even as progress in other facets of the war slowed or declined. Nixon announced the withdrawal of 25,000 soldiers in June 1969, another 35,000 in September, 50,000 more in December, and a further 150,000 in April 1970.²³ Nixon acknowledged the risks of bringing soldiers home when the peace was not yet won, but he was willing to take "risks for peace," he said, as long as North Vietnam did not increase its attacks.²⁴ But it turned out that de-escalation followed a slope as slippery as escalation.

²¹ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam," December 15, 1969, APP.

²² Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam," April 20, 1970, APP.

²³ For these withdrawal announcements see Richard M. Nixon, "Remarks Following Initial Meeting With President Thieu at Midway Island," June 8, 1969; "Statement on United States Troops in Vietnam," September 16, 1969; "Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam," December 15, 1969; "Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam," April 20, 1970, APP.

²⁴ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam," April 20, 1970, APP.

The Limits of Vietnamization

U.S. strategists soon expressed grave doubts about the effectiveness of Vietnamization, however. Military leaders sometimes struggled to understand the objectives and value of withdrawal. As Westmoreland pointed out, the Army's combat death rate in Vietnam was the lowest in U.S. history and he wondered why Americans were so disturbed by the relatively low casualty rate.²⁵ Meanwhile, in September 1969, Kissinger explained that he was "deeply concerned" about the present course in Vietnam because time "runs more quickly against our strategy than against theirs." The United States was trying to solve Vietnam in Washington, in Saigon, and in Paris but, in order to succeed at the conference table, the United States also had to be "reasonably successful on *both* of the other two fronts."²⁶

On the home front, Kissinger expected that "The pressure of public opinion on you to resolve the war quickly will increase" significantly in coming months and he did not believe that Vietnamization could "reduce the pressures for an end to the war." In fact, Kissinger thought the policy might actually *increase* the pressure "after a certain point." Under such circumstances, Nixon could find himself caught between hawks and doves, just like Johnson.²⁷

In Vietnam, Kissinger did not feel optimistic about turning over military operations to the GVN and ARVN and thought Vietnamization would lead to serious problems because it would make an acceptable settlement harder, not easier. For one, de-escalation, like escalation, was a slippery slope and, once the Nixon administration began the process of bringing soldiers home, it would be hard to stop. Kissinger explained, "Withdrawal of U.S. troops will become like salted peanuts to the American public: The more U.S. troops come home, the more will be demanded.

²⁵ Westmoreland, *Report of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army*, 19.

²⁶ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 117.

²⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 117.

This could eventually result, in effect, in demands for unilateral withdrawal – perhaps within a year.” Withdrawal would also boost Hanoi’s morale. “The more troops are withdrawn, the more Hanoi will be encouraged – they are the last people we will be able to fool about the ability of the South Vietnamese to take over from us,” Kissinger wrote. Meanwhile, America’s own morale would become tougher to sustain, “It will become harder and harder to maintain the morale of those who remain, not to speak of their mothers,” he noted. Moreover, Vietnamization would not necessarily reduce U.S. casualties because, as Kissinger reasoned, “our casualty rate may be unrelated to the total number of American troops in South Vietnam.” North Vietnam’s forces would not find it difficult to keep the death toll steady at 150 American lives every week since its low-cost strategy of “protracted warfare” aimed at defeating the United States psychologically, rather than militarily.²⁸

At the negotiating table, Kissinger argued that the United States was not in a position of strength to obtain acceptable terms in Paris and, consequently, North Vietnam could hold out for a better deal. Kissinger told Nixon, “There is not therefore enough of a prospect of progress in Vietnam to persuade Hanoi to make real concessions in Paris. Their intransigence is also based on their estimate of growing U.S. domestic opposition to our Vietnam policies. It looks as though they are prepared to try to wait us out.”²⁹ “In brief,” Kissinger concluded, “I do not believe we can make enough evident progress in Vietnam to hold the line within the U.S. (and the U.S. Government), and Hanoi has adopted a strategy which it should be able to maintain for some time... Hence my growing concern.”³⁰

To resolve those concerns, Kissinger outlined four courses of action for the U.S. in Vietnam the following day. Like the Johnson administration’s debate in the fall of 1967, the U.S. could hold

²⁸ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 117.

²⁹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 117.

³⁰ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 117.

the course it was on, accelerate negotiations while maintaining Vietnamization and limited war; accelerate Vietnamization while maintaining negotiations and limited war; or escalate the war while maintaining negotiations and halting Vietnamization. Kissinger discussed the pros and cons of each option, but the main goal was to convince North Vietnam that they had nothing to gain by stalling negotiations and to maintain the support of the American people for an honorable outcome. To maintain public support, Kissinger advised Nixon to buy time with Americans by pursuing reasonable negotiations, phasing out the U.S. presence in South Vietnam, lowering U.S. casualties by modifying military tactics, and convincing Americans that South Vietnam's position had improved while North Vietnam's had worsened. By taking these steps, Nixon could show the country that time was on their side, if they had the patience. Selling that point would be difficult though, Kissinger conceded. "Given the history of over-optimistic reports on Vietnam the past few years, it would be practically impossible to convince the American people that the other side is hurting and therefore, with patience, time could be on our side," he admitted. Nixon was also "rightly reluctant to appear optimistic and assume his own credibility gap" while many dissenters simply did not care about the United States' military fortunes. To them, Kissinger pointed out, "the strength of the allied position is irrelevant – they want an end to the war at any price."³¹

Escalation

The United States could have escalated the war although, as Kissinger noted, escalation would simply be employed "as a means to a negotiated settlement, not as an end, since we have ruled out military victory. We would halt escalation as soon as it produced diplomatic results."

Kissinger also wanted to emphasize that American aims remained limited. The United States was not fighting for victory in Vietnam. The enemy would not have to choose between victory and defeat as

³¹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970, no. 119.*

Germany and Japan had in World War II. In Vietnam, victory meant peace, and escalation was merely a means to advance negotiations which were another means to procure peace. To persuade Americans who wanted peace immediately, Kissinger wanted the Nixon administration to “reaffirm our limited goals, underscore enemy intransigence, and demonstrate that the only alternatives were endless stalemate or humiliation.”³²

Even though the Nixon administration had ruled out military victory, the President still believed that the U.S. had to put pressure on North Vietnam to achieve peace with honor. On October 17, 1969, Nixon met with Kissinger and Sir Robert Thompson, the British counter-insurgency expert to talk about the Vietnam situation. Nixon criticized Johnson’s unilateral bombing halts for not offering a quid pro quo. The President also insisted that the United States had to be willing to do what it took to achieve its limited objectives. Regardless of why the U.S. was in Vietnam at all, he asserted that “the political consequences of defeat were such that we had to see it through.” Nixon therefore asked Thompson what he thought of the “option to the right,” meaning escalation. Thompson answered that he would “rule escalation out.” The administration was already at odds with American opinion and dissent, as well as world opinion. Thompson admitted that the U.S. could probably achieve victory in two years if South Vietnam remained confident in U.S. support and success. But if they thought the U.S. was going to withdraw, they would collapse. Nixon responded that the stakes of the war were too high for the U.S. to walk away. The U.S. was fighting not only for peace in the Pacific or for independence in the region, but for its own survival as a world power. “If South Vietnam were to go, after a matter of months countries such as Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia would have to adjust because they believe they must play the winner,” Nixon remarked, repeating the Domino Theory. Moreover, “500,000 people in Vietnam would be

³² *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970, no. 119.*

massacred,” he claimed. Thompson did not argue with Nixon’s consequences, but he concluded the conversation by pointing out that the United States and the Vietnamese were “fighting at different levels.” Unlike the United States, the Vietnamese were fighting for survival and were therefore willing to do whatever it took to win. The United States and Great Britain had once fought for survival and victory at all costs and, in those cases, had “used everything in the book.” Americans were no longer willing to endure those costs now.³³

Negotiations (1969-1970)

The unwillingness to tolerate the costs of war was manifested to a degree by the willingness to negotiate. The Nixon administration was willing to fight to protect South Vietnam’s sovereignty and to achieve a lasting peace, but U.S. strategists preferred to talk. If the U.S. could negotiate a political and military settlement that would end the war on acceptable terms and grant self-determination to South Vietnam, the United States could withdraw all of its forces. Peace talks and peace settlements would save lives and the United States tried to negotiate an end to the war primarily to stop the killing in Vietnam. The death of any man in war, “an American, a South Vietnamese, a Vietcong, or a North Vietnamese, [was] a human tragedy,” Nixon declared in April 1970. The United States, therefore, wanted to end the war and “achieve a just peace” in order to stop those tragedies and U.S. strategists called on their enemies to work toward that peace at the conference table.³⁴

The peace talks proved excruciating for American diplomats, however. As the Nixon administration settled into Washington, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker told Secretary of State William P. Rogers on January 24, 1969, that negotiations were slow, and that Americans needed to adjust their expectations. Unless the United States was willing to leave Vietnam unconditionally, the

³³ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 137.

³⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam,” April 20, 1970, APP.

Nixon administration needed to make it clear to Congress and the public that “the negotiations will be arduous, complex, difficult and probably long (unless we want agreement at any price).” Bunker further advised, “pressure for speed and the practice of fixing deadlines are quite likely to result in slower, rather than faster, progress on the substantive issues.” If the U.S. tried to make fast progress with the North Vietnamese and “signal to him that we are in a hurry and working to deadlines, he will merely dig in, try to exact every possible concession from us, and thus prolong the negotiations.”³⁵

If the peace talks failed, the Nixon administration was prepared to achieve its goals through force, but the president suggested in April 1970 that there was a “better, shorter path to peace.” Nixon apparently did not believe that diplomacy would lead to a better outcome – a higher quality, more genuine, more effective, or longer lasting peace. Instead, Nixon seems to have thought that negotiations would achieve peace more quickly and at less cost. If persuasion or compulsion did not change the nature or quality of the resulting peace, then the most important objective was to end the war with as little time and blood lost as possible.³⁶

Therefore, if the U.S. could make progress at the peace table, Nixon could withdraw American troops. In fact, Nixon stated in April 1970 that if North Vietnam had “responded positively” to his peace proposal the previous May, most American troops could have left South Vietnam already. The problem, however, was that Hanoi had repeatedly thwarted attempts to end the war. In the past, Hanoi had agreed to negotiate if the U.S. quit bombing North Vietnam, if the U.S. started to withdraw its forces from South Vietnam, if the U.S. would accept the National Liberation Front (NLF) as a legitimate party to the negotiations, and if the U.S. agreed in principle to removing all its forces from Vietnam. Nixon noted in April 1970 that the United States had taken

³⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970, no. 7.*

³⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam,” April 20, 1970, APP.

all of those steps. The U.S. had accepted the NLF as a party to the peace talks long ago and had stopped bombing North Vietnam in 1968. The Nixon administration had already withdrawn more than 115,000 soldiers and Nixon had just announced the removal of another 150,000 troops. The U.S. was perfectly willing to withdraw all of its forces if North Vietnam would withdraw theirs.³⁷

Nixon propounded his administration's own peace proposal in his speech on May 14, 1969, and on many other occasions. The president called for the complete withdrawal of all outside or foreign forces from South Vietnam within one year, the release of all prisoners of war, a ceasefire supervised by an international arbiter, and free elections under international supervision with a pledge by Saigon that South Vietnam would accept the election results and incorporate communists into the new government.³⁸ North Vietnam rejected the peace plan.

The real issue was that North Vietnam still insisted on the unilateral withdrawal of American forces and the imposition of a communist government on South Vietnam. In a reversal from World War II, the United States found itself appealing for a peace settlement short of total defeat for South Vietnam while North Vietnam demanded that the Americans withdraw their forces unconditionally. In March, May, and August 1969, North Vietnam's Xuan Thuy insisted that the U.S. pullout "unconditionally."³⁹ Henry Kissinger explained on August 6 that "he would not quarrel about the word unconditional," but "there must be a quid pro quo for American withdrawal, a unilateral pull-out was out of the question."⁴⁰

In his speech to the nation on May 14, 1969, Nixon argued that a communist Vietnam and American withdrawal amounted to total victory for North Vietnam and defeat and humiliation for

³⁷ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam," April 20, 1970, APP.

³⁸ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," May 14, 1969; see also "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," November 3, 1969, APP.

³⁹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, nos. 31, 72, 106.

⁴⁰ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 106.

the United States. He insisted that the only acceptable political settlement was one that reflected the will of the South Vietnamese people and allowed them to choose their future without outside interference. Nevertheless, the president said the U.S. would continue to participate in the peace talks to negotiate a settlement that was fair to North Vietnam and the United States, and to South Vietnam most of all. Everything was negotiable, he announced, “except the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own fate.”⁴¹ In short, Nixon seemed most frustrated by the fact that the peace process was one-sided. He felt that the United States had “taken risks for peace” that North Vietnam had not; that Washington had opened avenues for peace and Hanoi had blocked them. But Nixon also warned Hanoi not to confuse his administration’s flexibility with weakness, or reasonableness with a lack of resolve. He insisted that the United States was committed to its goals in Vietnam. The President could not and would not “ask unlimited patience from a people whose hopes for peace have too often been raised and then cruelly dashed over the past 4 years” but he warned Hanoi that America’s will would not falter: its soldiers would not be “worn down,” its mediators would not be “talked down” and its allies would not be “let down.”⁴²

Despite Nixon’s stirring parallelism, Secretary Laird complained later that month that the State Department’s negotiating team was ineffective and formulating policies and positions contrary to the President’s public commitments. According to Laird, Ambassador Walsh was “totally out of it, not at all forceful,” and presented “no firm views,” while Henry Cabot Lodge resembled an old man surrounded by bright boys from State. The real problem, however, was that the negotiators were giving up too much to North Vietnam. Laird explained, “In short, the State Department

⁴¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam,” December 15, 1969, APP; see also “Address Before the 24th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations,” September 18, 1969, APP.

⁴² Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” May 14, 1969, APP.

members of the delegation seem bound and determined to fly in the face of historical experience and, if left to their own devices, to secure a peace at almost any price.”⁴³

Hanoi remained assured that North Vietnam would win the war because, as Robert Thompson had noted, the Americans did not have the will to win and the communists did. In Paris, Le Duc Tho told Kissinger and the American delegation in February 1970 that Vietnamization would not work. North Vietnam had endured “many hardships,” he admitted, “But we have won the war. You have failed.”

“What?” Kissinger responded.

“We have won the war,” Tho repeated. Then, he elaborated, “We think that you have two methods to try to end the war: (1) Vietnamization; and (2) negotiations from a position of strength.” He then proceeded to summarize American strategy and its inherent flaws to the American delegation. If the United States gradually withdrew its forces “down to a level bearable to the American people in human lives and cost,” they would have to leave behind enough support forces or advisers to strengthen the “puppet troops” who were supposed to take over responsibility for the war. “But we wonder whether and when the puppet troops can do that,” Tho stated, “It will take an unlimited time.” And, if the strategy did not work, the U.S. “will have the choice to remain in Vietnam or leave.” If South Vietnam could not assume the burden of the war, the U.S. would have to stay and, Tho projected, “the war will drag on, and you will remain in our country.” In other words, Vietnamization would prolong the war, not shorten it, but Tho insisted the U.S. could not win. He vowed, “If you intensify the war in South Vietnam, if you even resume bombing North

⁴³ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970, no. 78.*

Vietnam, we are prepared. We are determined to continue the fight until we win victory.” In fact, Tho claimed that North Vietnam was willing to pursue victory at all costs:

If our generation cannot win, then our sons and nephews will continue. We will sacrifice everything, but we will not again have slavery. This is our iron will. We have been fighting for 25 years, the French and you. You wanted to quench our spirit with bombs and shells. But they cannot force us to submit.

“Therefore,” he concluded, “if you continue with Vietnamization, with the search for a position of strength, maximum military pressure, we will continue to fight, and I am convinced we will win victory.”⁴⁴ Two months later, in April 1970, Tho again averred that North Vietnam would win because the people of Indochina “will continue to fight to have victory, no matter how great the sacrifices may be.”⁴⁵

By July 1970, Kissinger reported that the U.S. had not made great progress in its negotiations. He explained, “The basic problem has been that to date the enemy has been able to calculate that we have greater problems than they do, that protracted struggle is preferable to real negotiations to accomplish their objectives. They thus stick with their two demands of unconditional unilateral American withdrawal and the overthrow of the Saigon regime.”⁴⁶ The situation was thus a complete inverse from the war with Japan in World War II. North Vietnam was willing to pursue total victory at all costs, demanded the unconditional withdrawal of U.S. forces, and waged an unlimited war to defeat South Vietnam and its American defenders. Hanoi presumed that U.S. leaders and the American public did not have the stomach for a protracted war and the casualties that the U.S. would have to endure to uphold South Vietnam and so if North Vietnam could make the war long and costly enough, the United States would eventually tire and sue for peace. The United States had fought an implacable enemy before but, in Vietnam, U.S. strategists were not

⁴⁴ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 190.

⁴⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, nos. 222-223.

⁴⁶ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VI, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970*, no. 347.

fighting for victory and were not willing to use any means to achieve their objectives because they believed that victory was both immoral and impossible. Certainly, at least by 1970, even a limited war for limited ends was too costly for the United States and U.S. strategists soon diminished their aims from victory through peace with honor to peace at any price.

VIETNAMIZATION (1970-1972)

As much as he tried to avoid it, Nixon's Doctrine became caught between the polarized demands of Vietnam hawks and doves. U.S. forces continued to wage a limited ground and air war in South Vietnam and a limited air war in North Vietnam, but Hawks criticized the administration for fighting with its hands tied and doves accused the administration of waging an immoral, all-out war. The United States continued to train South Vietnamese forces and brought American soldiers home and hawks condemned Nixon for pulling out while doves denounced the gradual withdrawal. And as U.S. diplomats negotiated for peace with North Vietnam in Paris, hawks decried the conversations with communists and doves attacked the administration's Machiavellian intransigence.

The President tried to navigate the political and moral minefield, however, by insisting that the United States was determined to achieve peace with honor and was not willing to have peace at any price. In some off-the-record remarks to newspaper editors at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago in September 1970, Nixon acknowledged that Americans were an impatient people, but he was determined to resist a unilateral withdrawal in order to achieve peace with honor. The war was not just about South Vietnam, he told the editors, it was about whether the United States could live up to its commitment. The goal, therefore, was not to achieve victory over North Vietnam but to ensure self-determination for South Vietnam and achieving peace with honor required a "long view" and the stamina to resist temptation. That was why, "despite the great political temptation... to get it over right now, pull them out, blame whoever started, et cetera" Nixon felt that the U.S. had to end

the war, but in a way that would discourage further aggression. “We are ending it. It is winding down. It will continue to,” the President announced, but the U.S. could not end it unilaterally or unconditionally because that would merely encourage American enemies and dismay their allies.⁴⁷

Months later, in a graduation address at the Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island, in March 1971, Nixon contended that the United States was trying to end the war in Vietnam, but on acceptable, honorable terms. He was not surprised to hear calls for appeasement echoing around the country, but he was “astonished to see them held in the name of morality.” The United States was willing to pay the price of peace, he declared, but the U.S. demanded peace with freedom, justice, and strength.⁴⁸

Nixon maintained his stance on peace with honor in his conversations with foreign leaders as well. In a meeting with President Tito of Yugoslavia in October 1971, Nixon made it clear that he wanted the communists to realize that he was not a “soft man” and that “The U.S. was not interested in peace at any cost.”⁴⁹ In December, the President similarly explained to British Prime Minister Edward Heath that part of the reason the U.S. had withdrawn its forces so slowly was to indicate “that we are not prepared to pay any price for ending a war.”⁵⁰

1970 Peace Plan

In the meantime, as U.S. and South Vietnamese forces fought to contain NVA attacks and the NLF insurgency in South Vietnam, the Nixon administration continued to offer and negotiate a peace agreement that would allow the United States to evacuate from Vietnam with its honor and

⁴⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976*, no. 71.

⁴⁸ Richard M. Nixon, “Address at Graduation Exercises of the Naval Officer Candidate School, Newport, Rhode Island,” March 12, 1971, APP.

⁴⁹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976*, no. 99. Nixon may well have intended his statement to Tito as a subtle hint and threat that he was not too soft to use nuclear weapons.

⁵⁰ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976*, no. 102.

ally intact. On October 7, 1970, Nixon again spoke to the nation and announced “a major new initiative for peace” which included a five-fold peace plan based on the recommendations from his chief advisors and discussions with the governments of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. By proposing to end the Vietnam War while preserving South Vietnam, the President believed that his peace plan would satisfy the moral demands of hawks and doves.

First, the President proposed that all armed forces in Indochina cease firing their weapons but remain in their current positions. This “cease-fire-in-place” would not end the war, but it would stop the killing and Nixon hoped that a stop to the violence could initiate agreements on other issues. Second, Nixon suggested an “Indochina Peace Conference” to cure all the outbreaks of war in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Third, Nixon offered to withdraw all American soldiers from Vietnam. He had already pulled out 165,000 Americans and, by the spring of 1971, the withdrawals would reach nearly 260,000 men – approximately half of the number that were in South Vietnam when Nixon took office. As America’s combat role and presence had decreased through Vietnamization and withdrawals, American casualties had decreased as well, and Nixon felt that the U.S. was now ready to negotiate a timetable for total withdrawal “as part of an overall settlement.” Fourth, Nixon asked North Vietnam to work with the U.S. to find a political settlement that would reflect the will of the South Vietnamese people and meet their aspirations. The United States would agree to accept the outcome of future free elections, but North Vietnam would have to abandon its efforts to dissolve South Vietnam’s non-communist parties and impose a communist government. The U.S. government was willing to be flexible “on many matters” but would not budge on the issue of self-determination for South Vietnam. Ultimately, the U.S. hoped for a settlement that would satisfy both sides since North Vietnam would still be there when the war ended, so “the only kind of settlement that [would] endure [was] one that both sides [had] an interest in preserving.” Fifth, the president proposed “the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of war held by both

sides.” By immediately releasing all POWs, journalists, and other innocent civilians, both sides could make humanitarian gestures, establish good faith, and “improve the prospects of negotiation.”⁵¹

Nixon believed that his five proposals offered a politically and morally acceptable peace agreement that could “open the door to an enduring peace in Indochina.” To assuage doves, the “cease-fire-in-place” intended to immediately stop the killing in Vietnam and the promise to totally withdraw all American troops would end the war for the United States. Meanwhile, the Indochina Conference aimed to end the war for everyone. Nixon argued that his proposals were “designed to end the fighting throughout Indochina and to end the impasse in negotiations in Paris. Nobody has anything to gain by delay and only lives to lose,” he declared. All the nations fighting in Indochina had announced their readiness to a ceasefire except North Vietnam and Nixon called on Hanoi to “join its neighbors” and “quit making war and to start making peace.” He noted that war had persisted in some part of the world since 1945, but a ceasefire in Indochina would enable the United States to establish peace “throughout the world for the first time in a generation.” Nixon even supposed that the world could reach “the beginning of the end of war in this century.” He concluded by declaring “There is no goal to which this Nation is more dedicated and to which I am more dedicated than to build a new structure of peace in the world where every nation, including North Vietnam as well as South Vietnam, can be free and independent with no fear of foreign aggression or foreign domination.”⁵²

The peace plan would also satisfy American hawks by establishing a political settlement that would contain communism and guarantee South Vietnam’s self-determination while freeing American soldiers from communist capture. Thus, the President’s peace plan showed that the

⁵¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation About a New Initiative for Peace in Southeast Asia,” October 7, 1970, APP.

⁵² Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation About a New Initiative for Peace in Southeast Asia,” October 7, 1970, APP.

United States remained committed to South Vietnam's self-determination *and* ending America's involvement in Vietnam, but those two goals were becoming increasingly incompatible.

Furthermore, by indicating that American withdrawals would not stop, Nixon also suggested that the United States was determined to get out of Vietnam sooner than later, and regardless of the cost. The United States had now reversed its policy from total victory in World War II to total withdrawal in Vietnam.

The Success of Vietnamization

Six months after announcing his five-fold peace plan, Nixon announced on April 7, 1971, that he would accelerate the rate of American withdrawals because of the successes of Vietnamization and the pacification of enemy forces. Progress in the war convinced the President that the U.S. could withdraw more soldiers at a faster rate without threatening the forces still in Vietnam and without jeopardizing America's "ultimate goal" of ending their involvement in a way that would increase the chances for lasting peace in the world. Through Vietnamization, the U.S. continued to train and equip South Vietnamese forces, withdraw American forces, and would end American involvement in the war once the South Vietnamese could defend themselves "against Communist aggression."⁵³

Since he had first taken office, Nixon claimed to have turned the war around. On a chart, Nixon illustrated to the nation how Vietnamization had increased withdrawals from 25,000 to 40,000 to 50,000, and then 150,000. By May 1, 1971, the president boasted, his administration would have brought 265,000 American soldiers home from Vietnam. The administration had also decreased American casualties. According to Nixon, casualties were five times higher in the first quarter of 1969 than in the first quarter of 1971 and South Vietnamese casualties had declined

⁵³ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," April 7, 1971, APP.

significantly as well. One dead American was still one too many though, Nixon declared. His administration aimed for zero American combat deaths on earth and every decision he had or would make was aimed at reducing casualties.

The operations in Cambodia and Laos also proved that American training and equipping programs were working, and that South Vietnam was more capable of defending itself. When he first ordered the attacks on enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia, Nixon recalled, many Americans feared that the President had widened the war, increased casualties, and delayed troop withdrawals – “we can see now they were wrong,” he affirmed with self-satisfaction. U.S. troops had entered and exited Cambodia in sixty days, just as he had promised, and, turning to some additional charts, Nixon showed that American casualties were cut in half while American withdrawals had accelerated. In Laos, the U.S. had provided air support for South Vietnamese ground forces who had demonstrated they could effectively combat the best North Vietnamese troops without American advisers. Even though the South Vietnamese suffered heavy losses, they had inflicted far more casualties on the enemy. The Laotian operations had also disrupted enemy supply lines and damaged North Vietnam’s capacity for major offensives.⁵⁴

Nixon therefore reported that “Vietnamization has succeeded.” Presuming that South Vietnam’s self-defense led to self-determination, the President announced an increase in the rate of American withdrawals. Between May 1 and December 1, 1971, 100,000 more Americans would be brought home from Vietnam and, by the end of the year, 365,000 soldiers would have returned home – more than two-thirds the number in Vietnam when Nixon first took office. Vietnamization therefore meant that “American involvement in Vietnam is coming to an end” and “The day the South Vietnamese can take over their own defense is in sight.” His goal, Nixon declared, was “total

⁵⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” April 7, 1971, APP.

American withdrawal from Vietnam.” The U.S. would reach its goal through Vietnamization if necessary, but the President would prefer to end the war sooner at the peace table. He called on Hanoi again to negotiate an end to the war, and immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners in Indochina.⁵⁵

If the ultimate goal was to withdraw all American forces from Vietnam, why did not Nixon circle a date on the calendar and have all the troops home by then? Nixon knew such a move would be popular, but a public announcement would serve Hanoi’s purposes more than America’s. If he were to announce that the United States was unilaterally quitting the war and going home – regardless of the enemy’s actions – the U.S. would be throwing away its “principal bargaining counter to win the release of American prisoners of war” and would remove Hanoi’s greatest incentive to end the war by negotiation. Moreover, if Nixon were to withdraw all Americans by December 31, North Vietnam could schedule their offensive for January 1. The President felt that he could not simply withdraw all American forces immediately because the U.S. had to give South Vietnam “a reasonable chance to survive as a free people.” His gradual withdrawal plan would give South Vietnam a fighting chance to save itself. Total, immediate, unilateral withdrawal would hand “victory to the Communists.”⁵⁶ Vietnamization must not have been going that well.

But regardless of whether the U.S. withdrew gradually or immediately, Nixon was firmly committed to ending America’s involvement in the war, whether or not that coincided with the end of the war for South Vietnam. Presidents had promised to end the war in the past but this time he was supposedly serious. Americans did not even have to take his promise on faith. The facts would support Nixon’s claims (hence the chart at his left). His chief goal as President of the United States was to achieve peace – at home and abroad – and Nixon claimed that every time he talked to the

⁵⁵ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” April 7, 1971, APP.

⁵⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” April 7, 1971, APP.

wife of a POW or wrote a letter to the mother of a boy killed in battle, he became more committed to ending the war and building a lasting peace.⁵⁷

Of course, the fundamental question, once again, was whether the United States should withdraw from the war at the expense of self-determination for South Vietnam. The president pleaded with Americans to “choose hope over despair” and leave Vietnam in a way that gave their ally “a realistic hope of freedom.” By doing so, the U.S. could prove to the rest of the world that “America’s sense of responsibility remains the world’s greatest single hope of peace.” Above all else, the U.S. could end the war “not meanly but nobly” so that Americans could retain their global reputation, dignity, pride, and hope for the future. By ending the war without regard for the consequences for South Vietnam the U.S. would abandon its friends and ideals and lose self-respect.

Nixon’s speech revealed again how much American attitudes, values, and ethics had changed from World War II. While Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman had always insisted on the unconditional surrender of German and Japanese forces, the only unconditional demands that Richard Nixon made were the unconditional release of all prisoners. U.S. strategists from the president on down repeatedly talked of total victory in World War II while Nixon sought total withdrawal from Vietnam. And while U.S. strategists certainly focused on saving American lives as U.S. forces advanced toward Japan, no one thought that the United States could achieve any worthwhile outcome from the war with zero casualties or tried to end the war at the negotiating table. The only ones who wanted to eliminate the human costs of war entirely were pacifists. Finally, the United States never could have negotiated Japan’s unconditional surrender and U.S. strategists rejected proposals for peace that did not allow the U.S. to win the war while the Nixon administration repeatedly tried to talk Hanoi into a political settlement without a decisive military

⁵⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” April 7, 1971, APP.

solution. The only acceptable peace in World War II was one made possible by victory, while the Nixon administration rejected victory without peace.

1972 Peace Plan

North Vietnam rejected Nixon's proposals, however, and the shortcut or preferred path to peace remained stalled. In January 1972, Nixon tried to break the diplomatic deadlock by revealing that the United States had been pursuing secret negotiations with North Vietnam. After ten months without progress in the public talks in Paris since taking office, Nixon had decided to try secret diplomacy and sent Henry Kissinger as his personal representative to begin the secret negotiations on August 4, 1969. In thirty months, Kissinger had traveled to Paris twelve times for secret meetings. He met with Le Duc Tho and Minister Xuan Thuy, head of the North Vietnamese delegation, seven times, and met with Xuan Thuy alone five times. Private talks permitted both sides to be more flexible and frank – they could take positions without the pressure of public debate – and “with so many lives at stake” in Vietnam, Nixon felt that the U.S. could not afford to ignore any opportunity for peace and he claimed to be ready to explore any dialogue to end the war.⁵⁸

Whenever Nixon, Kissinger, or Secretary of State William P. Rogers were asked about the secret negotiations they would say only that they were “pursuing every possible channel” for peace. They did not disclose the secret talks because they did not want to jeopardize the progress they thought they could make. However, U.S. strategists soon found that confidentiality allowed Hanoi to exploit the administration's good faith by suggesting possible solutions publicly while rejecting them in private. After two and a half years of quiet negotiations without an end to the war, Nixon publicized the secret talks in January 1972. The time had come, the President said, “to lay the record of our secret negotiations on the table.” Just as the administration hoped that secret talks could

⁵⁸ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Making Public a Plan for Peace in Vietnam,” January 25, 1972, APP.

break the public deadlock, they now hoped that public disclosure could help break the secret deadlock. In Nixon's side of the story, Hanoi rejected all of America's proposals and continued to demand the overthrow of the government in Saigon. Every time the American representatives came to the table with a reasonable suggestion, the North Vietnamese delegation told them to jump in a lake. In short, Nixon explained, Hanoi was morally responsible for the length of the war, not Washington or Saigon.⁵⁹

Since covert diplomacy had failed, the Nixon administration returned fully to overt diplomacy as the President publicly announced "a plan for peace that can end the war in Vietnam," on January 25, 1972. The plan contained all the familiar proposals from previous plans: the withdrawal of all American and allied forces from South Vietnam within six months of an agreement; an exchange of all prisoners of war; a ceasefire throughout Indochina; and new free and democratic elections in South Vietnam which would include all political forces in the country, supervised by an international arbiter. U.S. negotiators had offered the peace plan privately more than three months earlier, but North Vietnam had ignored it. But now that Nixon had made the proposals public, it could no longer be ignored. Nixon called the plan "generous and far-reaching" and thought his administration had gone the extra mile in offering a settlement that was fair to both North and South Vietnam. The only thing the U.S. would not accept was the overthrow of the government in Saigon. "If the enemy wants peace," Nixon declared, "it will have to recognize the important difference between settlement and surrender."⁶⁰

There were "two honorable paths" to peace, the president proclaimed in January 1972. "The path of negotiation" remained the preferred road to peace, "But it takes two to negotiate," Nixon said, and, since Hanoi blocked all American proposals, U.S. strategists tried to find an alternate route

⁵⁹ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation Making Public a Plan for Peace in Vietnam," January 25, 1972, APP.

⁶⁰ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation Making Public a Plan for Peace in Vietnam," January 25, 1972, APP.

to peace through Vietnamization. This strategy meant “training and equipping the South Vietnamese to defend themselves, and steadily withdrawing Americans, as they developed the capability to do so.” In effect, Vietnamization provided a solution to the Vietnam quagmire – it allowed the United States to withdraw its forces and end its participation in the war, without sacrificing America’s overarching objectives of self-determination for South Vietnam and lasting peace in the world. Vietnamization was a longer path to peace and Nixon acknowledged that the program had “strained the patience and tested the perseverance of the American people” but by 1972 Nixon regarded it as a success.⁶¹ In January, he had announced the withdrawal of another 70,000 U.S. soldiers – half of the remaining American troops in Vietnam – so that by May 1 U.S. forces would dwindle to just 69,000.⁶² By that time, his administration would have withdrawn more than 87% of the U.S. forces in Vietnam and reduced American casualties by 95% – from around three hundred to less than ten a week. American draftees had fallen to just 5,000 a month and Nixon expected to draft zero American men in 1973.⁶³ The Vietnam War was coming to an end for the United States, honorable or not.

HANOI & HAIPHONG

Nixon’s public optimism was smashed, however, in the spring of 1972 when North Vietnam launched an offensive and invaded South Vietnam on Easter weekend. Hanoi had already rejected Nixon’s latest peace plan and the President noted that there were now more than 120,000 North Vietnamese soldiers fighting in South Vietnam while there were zero South Vietnamese soldiers in North Vietnam. “What we are witnessing here – what is being brutally inflicted upon the people of

⁶¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Making Public a Plan for Peace in Vietnam,” January 25, 1972, APP.

⁶² Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks Announcing Withdrawal of Additional United States Troops From Vietnam,” January 13, 1972, APP.

⁶³ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Making Public a Plan for Peace in Vietnam,” January 25, 1972; “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” April 26, 1972, APP.

South Vietnam,” the President declared, “is a clear case of naked and unprovoked aggression across an international border. There is only one word for it invasion.”⁶⁴

To halt the Easter invasion and force Hanoi to negotiate, the military developed plans to escalate the war which included bombing, mining, and blockade operations in North Vietnam. President Nixon was enthusiastic about using strategic air power to exact an intolerable price of North Vietnam but the plans to attack Hanoi and Haiphong, in particular, raised political and moral misgivings from U.S. strategists. Some advisors thought the political and diplomatic costs would outweigh the benefits of attacking North Vietnamese cities and ports, but Nixon’s moral considerations were swallowed up in his determination to avoid losing South Vietnam. In their cold-blooded analysis, many strategists also believed that the U.S. would have to un-limit its operations in order to steady the dominos in Southeast Asia while others felt North Vietnam should not be able to attack the South with impunity. Ultimately, in his speech on May 8, Nixon explained that he had adopted decisive action out of moral expediency. To save the remaining American soldiers, defend South Vietnam from a communist takeover, and achieve peace with honor, the President had authorized bombing, mining, and blockade operations against the North.

Nixon contended that his administration would not accept peace at any price and was willing to do whatever it took to secure an acceptable peace settlement for the United States and self-determination for South Vietnam. But even the bombing and blockade program against North Vietnam was limited. In fact, Nixon seemed especially frustrated that North Vietnam was waging an immoral total war for total victory while the United States was fighting a moral limited war for limited objectives. The President had already excluded the possibility of using nuclear weapons or ground forces against North Vietnam and then felt incredulous when North Vietnam took

⁶⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” April 26, 1972, APP.

advantage of American restraints. Nixon was not speaking hypocritically, however, and saying he was willing to do whatever it took to achieve U.S. goals when he really wasn't. Rather, his statements show that the nuclear taboo and moral inflation had become so prevalent that nuclear attacks and an invasion of North Vietnam were anachronistic to American strategic thinking in 1972.

When U.S. strategists first discussed the response to the Easter Offensive in April, they talked about fighting an unlimited war. In a memo from General Alexander Haig, the Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs, to Henry Kissinger on April 6, Haig introduced the Pentagon's plans for "an intense no-holds barred air and naval campaign against the North." U.S. forces would bomb all areas of North Vietnam (except the buffer zone along the PRC border) including Haiphong harbor and military targets in Hanoi. Haig explained that the bombing would have few restraints, "The strikes would be as intense as possible... and concentrated on areas likely to produce the maximum psychological and military effect. Rules of engagement and target selection would be liberal." At the same time, the U.S. would launch a "companion naval campaign" to bombard North Vietnam's coast, mine Haiphong and other ports, and blockade and interdict shipping. "A parallel psychological campaign" would also employ all diplomatic measures to pressure North Vietnam to stop its aggression and negotiate. The military was not certain that the bombing would coerce the communists to the negotiating table, but it could force them to stop their offensive, facilitate a counteroffensive by ARVN, and enhance American credibility.⁶⁵

On April 17, Nixon talked about the proposed bombing and blockade plan with Kissinger, Laird, and Admiral Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. There, the President emphasized the importance of exacting a price that would force Hanoi into concessions. Nixon explained that, if North Vietnamese forces began retreating, the U.S. should not reduce its bombing

⁶⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 67.*

but should “keep it at the maximum.” Just as Henry Stimson had proposed that the U.S. continue to throw punches when Japan started to stagger in World War II, Nixon declared that “The time to hit the goddamn enemy is... when you can shoot them in the back. And boy we’ll let them have it. Right?” Remembering how the North Vietnamese had decimated the South Vietnamese in Operation Lam Son 719 one year earlier, the President announced, “I want to give it to them ten times right in the butt.”⁶⁶

Laird did not want Nixon to turn the bombing into a “bloodbath,” but the President insisted that his administration was not going to fall for Hanoi’s wails like Lyndon Johnson had and stop the bombing in hopes that North Vietnam would talk. The stakes of the war were too high to let up. In previous discussions, Nixon had often stated that American foreign policy was on the line but so was “the honor of the armed services of this country,” he declared. “The United States with all of its power has had 50,000 dead,” he continued, “If we get run out of this place now, confidence in the armed services will be like a snake’s belly. So we can’t let it happen.” He turned to Admiral Moorer at the end of the meeting and told him, “we appreciate what you’re doing and remember: don’t lose. That’s all. It’s the only order you’ve got. Not now.”⁶⁷

The President made similar points three days later in a conversation with Haig in which Nixon extolled the power of U.S. air forces to pressure North Vietnam. At the time, ARVN forces were fighting furiously to blunt the Easter Offensive at An Loc, the capital of Bình Phước Province in Military Region III. Thanks to its air superiority, the United States was able to pulverize enemy positions and Nixon announced that he supported that strategy. The President wondered whether it made more sense, psychologically, to back out of the towns in Vietnam and “bomb [them] to

⁶⁶ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 83.*

⁶⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 83.*

smithereens.” After all, he explained, “Al, our purpose here is not to hold territory; it’s to destroy the enemy. If you could retreat and get the enemy in a more exposed position for bombing, then I’d retreat and then destroy it and go back in. Doesn’t that make sense?” Looking forward to the plans to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong though, Nixon asked Haig if he thought strategic bombing actually “stiffens their resolve on absolute victory.” Haig pointed out that bombing could have that effect in the short term but “this country has been through it before” and now they were “just sick of it.” When the U.S. had stopped bombing in 1968, “they were on their knees,” Haig claimed, but Nixon vowed not to pull punches this time. Bombing Hanoi and Haiphong would be more destructive and coercive than in 1968 and the general agreed that the Air Force’s techniques had improved and “instead of Robert McNamara, as he used to do, sitting at the desk picking the targets,” the field commanders would be allowed to do it without debilitating or limiting the strikes. Nixon seemed enamored with the power of strategic bombing and prodded Haig, “I take it that’s an enormously potent ordeal, isn’t it?”⁶⁸

“[I]t’s just a frightening weapon,” Haig replied. “It’s a frightening weapon when you’re on the ground. I’ve used it close in to our troops, and I’ll tell you it’s —”

“It’s really something?” Nixon interrupted.

“God, you know, you just see these shockwaves,” Haig described. “The whole ground trembles and you get no warning because they’re up higher and you can’t see them when they’re coming. You just hear all of a sudden this whistling, an eerie whistle.”

Nixon continued, “And the ground shakes?”

⁶⁸ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 91.*

“And the whole ground shakes. It does get your attention,” Haig explained.⁶⁹

Publicly, Nixon announced in a speech on April 26 that he had consulted with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, Ambassador Bunker, Ambassador Porter, and other senior advisers, and decided to support the South Vietnamese forces by escalating each one of America’s strategies: withdrawals, negotiations, and bombing. Since South Vietnam was resisting the invasion effectively on its own, without any involvement by U.S. soldiers, Nixon promised not to involve U.S. ground troops and planned to continue the withdrawals without jeopardizing the “overall goal of ensuring South Vietnam’s survival as an independent country.” Over the next three months, the U.S. would bring home 20,000 more soldiers from Vietnam, leaving only 49,000 there – “a reduction of half a million men since [Nixon’s] Administration came into office.”⁷⁰

The U.S. also restarted peace talks, the President announced. Nixon had sent Kissinger to Moscow on April 20 for four days of meetings with instructions to emphasize the United States’ desire for a quick end to the war, and a willingness to consider all avenues and possibilities for peace. He had also authorized Kissinger to meet privately with Le Duc Tho in Paris on May 2 while Ambassador Porter resumed public peace talks in Paris on April 27 and tried to persuade North Vietnam to halt its invasion and return American prisoners of war.⁷¹ While these softball negotiations took place in Paris, the President had ordered U.S. air and naval attacks against military targets in both North and South Vietnam. Until North Vietnam halted its offensive, Nixon refused to stop bombing “as a condition for returning to the negotiating table.” North Vietnam had sold that stipulation in 1968 and the president claimed the U.S. was “not going to buy it again in 1972.”⁷²

⁶⁹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972*, no. 91.

⁷⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” April 26, 1972, APP.

⁷¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” April 26, 1972; “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” May 8, 1972, APP.

⁷² Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” April 26, 1972, APP.

Despite the President's enthusiasm for bombing though, other strategists questioned the benefits of attacking North Vietnamese cities. Winston Lord, a staff member of the National Security Council wrote to Kissinger on May 1 and weighed in on the decision to renew bombing Hanoi and Haiphong. Essentially, Lord stated, it was "a decision whether to play summit chips in the Vietnam game," referring to the Milton Bradley board game, and Lord determined that the risks were heavy and the benefits unlikely. Ultimately, the decision depended mostly on Moscow's reaction, but Lord enumerated other considerations. Certainly, the president's credibility was at stake. Nixon had stated that he would do whatever was required and all options were open, but Lord pointed out that failure to bomb the North could look like a deal with Moscow, might suggest a failure of presidential determination, and nervousness about domestic politics. Nixon's credibility was also a function of "whether he will permit South Vietnam to 'lose,'" and Lord pessimistically believed that if South Vietnam lost, bombing Hanoi and Haiphong would not help much or make a difference. There were other military, psychological, and diplomatic considerations to address, but Lord worried the most about domestic reactions. Bombing North Vietnam was sure to cause civilian casualties which would trigger domestic protests and, although Americans on the political right would receive a temporary boost, the left would criticize the President no matter what. More importantly, Lord argued that "the decisive weight of American opinion would shift against the President if the bombing did not bring rapid results on the ground or diplomatically," or if it sunk the upcoming Moscow summit or hurt the SALT agreement.⁷³

The most critical consideration though, was how Moscow would react since the bombing was intended to also induce the Kremlin into pressuring Hanoi to negotiate. The military hoped, in Lord's words, that "Moscow, getting the dangerous message, *will* choose to pressure Hanoi" instead

⁷³ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 106.*

of scuttling the summit or SALT, and *could* pressure Hanoi “effectively and quickly.” Lord did not think either assumption was plausible since there was no assurance that Moscow would prioritize the summit over its ally. Furthermore, Lord questioned, how would the Soviets compel North Vietnam? “Can the Russians really make them desist, particularly with the Chinese looking over their shoulders?” he asked. “I just don’t see Hanoi – when it may think it has victory in its grasp – doing what big brother wants it to do,” he stated. More likely, Moscow would sacrifice the summit and then “We will then have the worst of both worlds – no help on Vietnam and all the setbacks of fractured U.S.-Soviet relations” which would include the loss of SALT. “Instead of the most important arms control agreement ever,” Lord stated, “we will face a heightened arms race, in which the Soviets will have a decided edge, given our domestic mood on defense spending.” Other areas of agreement with Moscow that had been “ripening” would also fall part and the U.S. would lose its major leverage on Peking, not to mention the strong domestic reaction.⁷⁴

Lord concluded,

In short, I believe we are much better off refraining from bombing the H–H areas and using our military assets where they count, pocketing a SALT agreement that is in our interest irrespective of what happens in Vietnam, and muddling through the summit as best we can. It is not a particularly attractive prospect. But the alternative is almost certainly not going to be decisive in Vietnam and very likely will cost us heavily in other areas.

Would American restraint demonstrate to the Soviets that the U.S. had “flinched”? That had been one of Kissinger’s major concerns, but Lord insisted that “whether we flinch or not is subordinate to whether or not we let South Vietnam ‘lose,’” and Lord did not think that bombing would be decisive diplomatically or militarily.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972*, no. 106.

⁷⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972*, no. 106.

On May 4, three days after Lord expressed his doubts, Nixon's Chief of Staff, H. R. "Bob" Haldeman, wrote in his diary that Nixon had decided to go ahead with the bombing and blockade plans and revealed that, although the President gave thought to the moral and political seriousness of the step, his concerns were swallowed up in the desire to avoid losing Vietnam. According to Haldeman, Nixon explained that he had been thinking it over and decided that the U.S. could not lose the war, so they were going to hit the North hard. In the context of the war, the summit with the Soviets was not important and "going to the Summit and paying the price of losing in Vietnam would not be satisfactory," Haldeman recorded. Kissinger, on the other hand, opposed "symbolic bombing," and felt that if the U.S. was going to bomb "we should do it totally," as Haldeman wrote.⁷⁶

After everyone left the meeting, Nixon confided with Haldeman about his moral compunctions. The President felt he had made the right decision but wanted to justify it by explaining that the blockade would keep lethal weapons out of the hands of "murderers and international outlaws." Haldeman recorded that Nixon felt good about making a decision and "feels it's the right one," but he also knew it was a "dramatic step, because it is a basic decision to go all out to win the war now." Again though, Nixon thought escalation would be justified and more likely to succeed because the U.S. had withdrawn most of its soldiers, had made peace overtures, established diplomatic ties to China, and laid "other groundwork" that should make such attacks possible. Nixon had also told Haldeman that morning that the arguments against blockade had "disappeared" and that a blockade was "more humane" than air strikes because it did not kill as many civilians.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 120.*

⁷⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 120.*

Nixon also talked with Kissinger on May 4 about the plans to bomb and blockade North Vietnam and Kissinger asserted that the U.S. “must do something drastic.” A blockade crossed the Rubicon and gave the U.S. the advantage of irrevocable commitment, “there’s no turning back,” Kissinger explained. The disadvantage was that it confronted the Soviets most directly and would “start the Chinese screaming,” according to Kissinger. In fact, he thought the President might be accused of “having blown up everything of your foreign policy.” Nixon consoled them both by repeating Clare Booth Luce’s homage that they would always be remembered as “the ones who went to China.”⁷⁸

The other disadvantage of blockade and bombing, they agreed, was that it would “trigger every goddamn peace group in this country.” By escalating the war, Nixon would be crossing the line that everyone was talking about, but the President refused to start and stop the bombing like Johnson had. “He’s back to bombing, bombing, bombing, bombing, stop the bombing, stop the bombing,” Nixon mimicked. Nevertheless, the President appreciated that bombing and blockade could be decisive. It might cost Nixon the election “but in the end, with a blockade we’ll win the war,” he argued. After eight months, a blockade could put the North on its knees, he claimed. And while the attacks on Hanoi and Haiphong would be brutal, the President felt it was the price they had to pay to win. Kissinger regretted that the U.S. could not send ground forces into North Vietnam. If one American division could go into “the panhandles,” he claimed, “they’d be finished... the problem is we can’t do it.” Nixon agreed. “Hell, if we had an American regiment to land... it would finish this damn thing. It’d frighten them to death.”⁷⁹

At the same time, Kissinger claimed if North Vietnam had given the U.S. a way to save face and get out, he was prepared to take it. Likewise, Nixon exclaimed, “all I care is that the United

⁷⁸ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 123.*

⁷⁹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 123.*

States of America at this point cannot have a viable foreign policy if we are humiliated in Vietnam. We must not lose in Vietnam. It's as cold as that." If the U.S. aimed for peace at any price, they could just surrender but Nixon wanted more than that. He stated, "if you're going to go for peace, you might as well surrender right off the bat, rather than the cost of it all in slaughter." But the communists had not given the U.S. "any way to avoid being humiliated" and so they had to "draw the sword." And now Nixon wanted to bomb the North "to smithereens." The "surgical operation theory is all right," he stated but, if it was necessary for the U.S. to wield its power, Nixon was not going to hold back. "If we draw the sword out, we're going to bomb those bastards all over the place," he declared, "And let it fly."⁸⁰

Kissinger concurred but worried about civilian casualties more than the President. "I don't want to kill civilians," Nixon stated, and he did not try to kill any, he claimed, but "don't be so careful that you don't knock out the oil for their tanks." Kissinger agreed, "Those have to go." On that issue, Nixon asked Kissinger to study "the dike situation" – Kissinger had stated on April 25 that if the U.S. destroyed the dikes in the Red River Delta, 200,000 Vietnamese might drown, but now Nixon seemed willing to at least consider such an attack.⁸¹

The day after Nixon and Kissinger's conversation, Kissinger asked some NSC staffers and a CIA official who had just studied the blockade's impact to talk about the possible international reactions to mining and bombing North Vietnam. Helmut Sonnenfeldt thought the Soviets would cancel the summit, but it would not start a war. John Negroponte felt the actions would boost ARVN morale and increase their fighting effectiveness while mining and all-out bombing could shake up Hanoi's power structure. John Holdridge thought China might lend North Vietnam some

⁸⁰ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 123.*

⁸¹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 123.*

manpower or provide refuge to northern aircraft, but he agreed that the actions would not likely lead to a major confrontation with the PRC.⁸²

Kissinger clarified that that the bombing and blockade would be executed brutally with no restraints and there would likely be domestic protests. This would probably be the most severe test North Vietnam had faced and it would undoubtedly strain their morale and social fabric because “There were limits to what they could ask their people to endure.” Kissinger hoped though that the operations would force Hanoi to change its calculations about the costs and benefits of all-out effort in the South while strengthening Thieu and the regime in Saigon and give the U.S. a bargaining chip for its POWs. There was also a small chance that it would accelerate negotiations and even end the war. Internationally, the disadvantage was that the U.S. would be investing and risking more prestige which would make defeat even more costly. It would also lose the summit with the Soviet Union and mitigate the success of Nixon’s Triangular Diplomacy which had thawed relations with the USSR and PRC.⁸³

For Holdridge, Negroponte, Sonnenfeldt, Richard Kennedy, General Haig, and George Carver, the Special Assistant for Vietnam Affairs at the CIA, the benefits of bombing and blockade were worth the risk although they worried about the consequences of domestic backlash over the resumption of bombing and civilian casualties. The administration would have to be willing to pay the price of domestic opposition. Jonathan T. Howe also approved the operation, but felt it had to be thorough and intensive.⁸⁴

The only one present who opposed the proposal was the pessimistic Winston Lord. Mostly, he did not think the operation would work and worried that U.S. losses would exceed its gains

⁸² *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972*, no. 127.

⁸³ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972*, no. 127.

⁸⁴ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972*, no. 127.

which would be compounded by throwing good money after bad. Lord outlined his misgivings in a more detailed memorandum later that day which stated that “No matter what we achieve we nevertheless certainly will suffer some of the losses suggested in the scenario:” the summit, SALT, civilian casualties, and so on. But Lord felt apprehensive about other, more grievous losses like “a more serious break with Peking, some Moscow–Peking rapprochement, etc.” Thus, even if the U.S. succeeded, “would there be a net gain?” he asked. If the U.S. did not succeed, “we’ll have compounded our losses – politically, psychologically, diplomatically.” Lord even though there was a chance that bombing and blockade could provoke “a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union – a Cuban missile crisis” in which the issues “would not be demonstrably crucial to our national security,” with “Strategic parity instead of superiority,” and domestic and world opinion “against us, not with us.” Kissinger, however, was amazed to report to Nixon that all but one of the advisors supported the plan to blockade and bombard North Vietnam.⁸⁵

By May 8, Nixon appears to have already decided to go forward with the bombing and blockade of North Vietnam, but he convened the NSC that morning in order to ask for their “cold-blooded analysis.” The President laid out the options for the U.S. and the projected costs and consequences. The U.S. had three options: do nothing; only bomb the North; or blockade, mine, and bomb. “The Soviet summit is jeopardized by each option open to us,” Nixon observed, and whatever the U.S. decided, there would be risks. For instance, if “a Soviet-supported opponent succeeds over a U.S.-supported opponent,” domestic politics and American allies would be hurt while “Our ability to conduct a credible foreign policy could be imperiled.” The diplomatic track was “totally blocked” – public sessions had gone nowhere, North Vietnam rejected all proposals, and, as Nixon explained, “The Communists now think they’re winning and they’re getting tougher at

⁸⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 127.*

the bargaining table.” Moreover, while some military officials thought the U.S. should conduct more air strikes on Hanoi and Haiphong, the DRV was likely to be better prepared, General Abrams needed assets in the South, and it was not clear what effective regular bombing might accomplish. Regardless of what the administration decided, however, Nixon indicated that “The summit is jeopardized by all these courses of action. That consideration we have to assume. There will be no summit.” Therefore, Nixon announced, “There is no good choice. The bug-out choice is a good political one but I am not sure what this office would be worth after doing that,” and the other military options would have serious foreign policy and domestic consequences. The first course was the least viable foreign policy but the most favorable political move while escalation had questionable value; neither would tip the balance sheet of success.⁸⁶

Admiral Moorer briefed everyone on the military details of the naval and air operations and maintained that the only measure more effective than bombing and blockade would be an amphibious landing. The U.S. had one Marine division in Okinawa, but Nixon had already said the U.S. would not introduce ground troops. The President also reiterated that bombing would either have to conform to restraints or risk civilian casualties – mining might be the most humane course of action. He added, “Whatever we do we must always avoid saying what we’re not going to do, like nuclear weapons. I referred to them saying that I did not consider them necessary. Obviously, we are not going to use nuclear weapons but we should leave it hanging over them. We should also leave the threat of marines hanging over them... We shouldn’t give reassurances to the enemy that we are not going balls out.” Clearly, Nixon was not willing to wage an unlimited war, but could not afford Hanoi to know that and he worried that a limited war would not be effective. While he felt constrained by the nuclear taboo and moral inflation, he also felt impelled to escalate the war in

⁸⁶ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 131.*

order to save South Vietnam. If South Vietnam “goes down the tube next year,” he asked, shouldn’t the U.S. do something now to erode the North’s ability to attack them? But what could a limited war do? “[U]nless we take off the wraps,” Nixon noted, it did not feel like U.S. strategy would be effective.⁸⁷

Secretary Laird, however, opposed the bombing plans, believing that South Vietnam could “make it.” Nixon wondered how the South could succeed without at least the psychological benefits of air strikes or sea interdiction, but Laird stated, “If they don’t have enough incentive, then all the equipment in the world won’t save them.”⁸⁸

Vice President Spiro Agnew argued that the U.S. could not afford to lose South Vietnam – even at the expense of domestic support. “By not doing anything more we would be giving testimony to our weakness,” he claimed. “Politically and domestically I think it will be vicious for the Administration but, Mr. President, if I were sitting where are you I would say we have got to do something. We’re the greatest people in the world for handcuffing ourselves. We are compulsive talkers. I don’t think you have any option.” General George A. Lincoln, the OPD’s chief planner in World War II who was now the Director of the Office of Emergency Preparedness, announced, “I believe the domino theory.” “I think we all do,” the President replied, “The real question is whether the Americans give a damn any more. Americans don’t care about Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and the Philippines. No President could risk New York to save Tel Aviv or Bonn.” To Nixon, it felt as if the American people did not have the stomach or the will to fight anymore, but he insisted that the U.S. could not afford to not be a great power. If the U.S. turned inwards and stepped off the world stage, “Every non-Communist nation in the world would live in terror. If the U.S. is strong enough and willing to use its strength, then the world will remain half-Communist rather than becoming

⁸⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 131.*

⁸⁸ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 131.*

entirely Communist.” Agnew agreed and stated, “Whatever we do, we should do it all... We should go the whole route.” Secretary of the Treasury John Connally also jumped on board, “I couldn’t agree more.” The U.S. simply could not lose in Vietnam. “If Vietnam is defeated, Mr. President, you won’t have anything,” he exclaimed. For that reason, Connally thought it would be “a mistake to tie our hands” and he agreed with the Vice President that the U.S. should go all-in. He declared, “It is inconceivable to me that we have fought this war without inflicting damage on the aggressor. The aggressor has a sanctuary.”⁸⁹

By the end of the meeting, Nixon summarized that all the advisors took positions “in varying degrees and shades.” Ultimately, he said, the issue came down to how the U.S. could prevent losing in Vietnam, and how to “make the losses palatable if we do in fact lose.” The President had to make his decision by 2 P.M. and he asked everyone to support him, no matter what he decided. “I don’t want to see columns appearing in the papers saying who agreed and who didn’t agree. If we decide to do this, it won’t work unless we do it with all-out ferocity,” he concluded.⁹⁰

After the NSC meeting, Nixon, Kissinger, Connally, and Haldeman met in the Oval Office and continued to discuss the arguments for and against the bombing, blockade, and mining of North Vietnam. The President asked Connally for his evaluation – “you just be as cold and deliberate as you can. Tell me what you think.” Connally noted that “The safest thing” would be to keep the status quo and not rock the foreign policy boat but, in his conversations with Laird and Rogers, the Secretary of State had opted for the “complete devastation of Hanoi and Haiphong. Just bomb them... raze them,” Rogers reportedly said. The Secretary of Defense had criticized some of the limits of the air war and thought U.S. sorties could have been more effective if they did not have to “pinpoint particular targets,” Laird had explained. Connally claimed he could support razing

⁸⁹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 131.*

⁹⁰ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 131.*

North Vietnam or withdrawing the remaining U.S. troops but what he could not support was “the continual degradation of our position and the position of the South Vietnamese” and leaving the viability of U.S. foreign policy in the hands of Saigon.⁹¹

What Nixon really wanted to know though, was whether the U.S. would be better off for bombing and blockading the North. Certainly, if South Vietnam went down, the President thought U.S. foreign policy would suffer “a shattering blow.” Rogers seemed to think that the U.S. would be worse off if it bombed Hanoi and Haiphong and South Vietnam still collapsed, but Connally suggested that the U.S. would be better off. At the very least, the U.S. will have “sent a message to other aggressor nations that they’re going to suffer some damage.” Thus far, the United States had “constantly been on the defensive.” The Air Force bombed North Vietnam but only “highly selective targets... There’s been no devastation,” Connally complained. People in North Vietnam had been “relatively free of these fears of retribution.” He observed that the “fear of retribution is a powerful motivating force” and the U.S. had “let them go ten years without it.” Meanwhile, the South Vietnamese lived in fear of being killed. So, just bombing the North to some degree would be useful because it would show “countries around the world that you just can’t be an aggressor with complete impunity.”⁹²

Kissinger thought the U.S. would be better off, too. He seemed less concerned about the international implications and more distressed about the fate of American soldiers. He explained, “we’ll have 60,000 Americans in their hands without any card to play at all.” If South Vietnam collapsed, there would be “massive disintegration,” Kissinger warned. North Vietnam would destroy ARVN – “they’re going to chew up one division at a time, until the remaining divisions are so demoralized that you get a massive collapse... Or an upheaval in Saigon.” Then the situation in the

⁹¹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 132.*

⁹² *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 132.*

South could really break down. Kissinger worried, “You could get some of these ARVN commanders turning on Americans – in order to prove to the Communists that they’re really nationalists.” Nixon agreed. But, Kissinger expounded, if the U.S. blockaded the North and ARVN still collapsed, the U.S. could “trade the blockade for the prisoners.” After hearing from Kissinger and Connally, Nixon ventured that “there’s a 40 to 50 percent chance that the South Vietnamese will go down the tube if we do nothing” and so he authorized Operation Pocket Money to mine Haiphong and other northern ports.⁹³

That night, on May 8, Nixon delivered another major speech to tell the country about the U.S. response to the Easter Offensive. The recent negotiations in Paris had failed. North Vietnam had repeated its demands for surrender in all meetings, both private and public, and rejected every peace proposal. The President explained that his administration had always preferred a negotiated settlement, but it took two to negotiate and North Vietnam refused anything short of a political settlement with a communist government imposed on South Vietnam. And now their offensive threatened the lives of 60,000 Americans still in Vietnam.⁹⁴

Many Americans believed that the best way to end the war was for the U.S. to leave and eliminate the threat to its remaining forces by withdrawing them. If Hanoi would not talk, then the United States should end the war unilaterally and save its soldiers by bringing them home. Nixon knew immediate withdrawal would be politically easy since he was not the one who had sent half a million Americans to Vietnam. But decoupling from Vietnam would abandon the South Vietnamese to “Communist tyranny and terror,” he claimed, and leave hundreds of American prisoners in North Vietnamese hands without any bargaining leverage to get them out. Immediate withdrawal

⁹³ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972*, no. 132.

⁹⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” May 8, 1972, APP.

amounted to defeat for the United States, and the President insisted once more that defeat in Vietnam would lead to other aggressions all over the world and jeopardize world peace.⁹⁵

Since negotiations had failed and the Nixon administration refused to withdraw unilaterally and abandon South Vietnam, the President said he felt he had to act decisively or else betray “the trust of his country” and “the cause of world peace.” He therefore announced a “decisive military action to end the war” and save the 60,000 Americans still in Vietnam. Nixon acknowledged that the killing in Vietnam had to stop but leaving would only exacerbate the bloodshed and relying wholly on negotiations would give North Vietnam the time to capitalize on the battlefield. For Nixon then, the choice for the United States was a matter of moral expediency and “really no choice at all.” In this case, the only “way to stop the killing” was “to keep the weapons of war out of the hands of the international outlaws of North Vietnam.” Nixon therefore announced that he had ordered the mining of all North Vietnamese ports and the interdiction of any military deliveries. Rail and other communications would be cut off and air and naval strikes against military targets in North Vietnam would continue. The President clarified that these actions were only directed against North Vietnam and that his orders would cease when North Vietnam met his conditions: all American POWs had to be returned and an internationally supervised ceasefire had to prevail throughout Indochina. Once those conditions had been met, the U.S. would “stop all acts of force” in Indochina and would complete the withdrawal of all American forces in Vietnam within four months. Nixon thought these terms were generous because they did not require surrender or humiliation for anyone. They would end the killing in Indochina, allow the United States to “withdraw with honor,” and bring all American prisoners home. The terms would enable negotiations for a political settlement between

⁹⁵ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” May 8, 1972, APP.

the Vietnamese and permit all nations in Indochina to begin the process of reconciliation, reconstruction, and peace.⁹⁶

Nixon's response to North Vietnam's invasion showed that the United States was not willing to walk away completely from Vietnam. Nixon felt that the U.S. had already bent over backwards to achieve peace, but it was not willing to stand aside while North Vietnam conquered South Vietnam. In three years of public and private negotiations, Nixon claimed the United States had "offered the maximum of what any President of the United States could offer." American representatives had offered a ceasefire, new elections with international supervision and communist participation, and a prisoner exchange with ten North Vietnamese for every one American.⁹⁷ The U.S. had also cut its air sorties in half and by July 1, 1972, the U.S. would have withdrawn over 90 percent of its forces that were in Vietnam when Nixon first took office. The one thing the United States would not do was "accede to the enemy's demand to overthrow the lawfully constituted Government of South Vietnam and to impose a Communist dictatorship in its place."⁹⁸

Nixon's sense of fairness and proportionality seemed offended. After all, the United States was not trying to conquer Vietnam and did not seek any territories or bases in Indochina while North Vietnam was trying to conquer South Vietnam. The U.S. had offered "the most generous peace terms – peace with honor for both sides – with South Vietnam and North Vietnam each respecting the other's independence," but Hanoi rejected all of the claims for independence and sovereignty for South Vietnam. North Vietnam also took advantage of America's good faith, exploited its withdrawals, escalated and expanded the war, and continued to demand the overthrow of South Vietnam. In other words, Nixon was frustrated that in a war in which the United States had

⁹⁶ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," May 8, 1972, APP.

⁹⁷ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," May 8, 1972, APP.

⁹⁸ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," April 26, 1972, APP.

restrained its means and ends – nobly using only limited conventional weapons, technologies, and strategies for South Vietnam’s self-determination – North Vietnam continued to maximize its resources and efforts for the immoral objective of overthrowing the regime in Saigon.⁹⁹ He argued that throughout the war, “the United States [had] exercised a degree of restraint unprecedented in the annals of war” since America’s goal was “peace not conquest.” But with the Easter Offensive, the U.S. grew tired of exercising restraint in the face of an enemy that showed no restraint and refused to negotiate.¹⁰⁰ In short, Nixon was frustrated that North Vietnam was fighting a wicked total war while the United States was fighting a righteous limited war.

In Nixon’s mind, therefore, the U.S. air and naval attacks against the North Vietnamese thus constituted, for his administration, a righteous indignation launched to punish the offending invaders. In the past, the President had warned that if North Vietnam took advantage of America’s withdrawals and escalated the war while the U.S. was trying to achieve peace, the commander in chief would respond with “strong and effective measures” to protect American lives and South Vietnamese sovereignty.¹⁰¹ Those threats seemed empty for the most part since Nixon did not say what form those measures would take, but with North Vietnam’s invasion he now promised to retaliate to protect the remaining American forces, to enable the withdrawal program to continue, and “to prevent the imposition of a Communist regime on the people of South Vietnam against their will, with the inevitable bloodbath that would follow for hundreds of thousands who have dared to oppose Communist aggression.” Nixon claimed that the attacks only aimed at military targets that supported North Vietnam’s invasion. When the invasion stopped, the attacks would

⁹⁹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” April 26, 1972, APP.

¹⁰⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” May 8, 1972, APP.

¹⁰¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969; “Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam,” December 15, 1969; “Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam,” April 20, 1970; “Address to the Nation Making Public a Plan for Peace in Vietnam,” January 25, 1972, APP.

stop.¹⁰² As he had explained after North Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, the U.S. had been "patient in working for peace" and "conciliatory at the conference table," but it would not be humiliated or defeated. And just as Nixon could not allow American soldiers to be killed from "privileged sanctuaries" in Cambodia or Laos, he would not suffer them to die now as the war for the U.S. was winding down.¹⁰³

Nixon's speeches and conversations with his advisers showed that U.S. strategists believed that South Vietnam could hold its own on the ground and the additional limited U.S. strikes would be sufficient to halt North Vietnam's invasion. Hanoi's only chance for success coincided with the failure of will among Congress and the American people. Nixon reminded the country that the U.S. had to maintain its international credibility for containing aggression. Because if one nation could invade and conquer another, then other nations would feel encouraged to do the same thing – in the Middle East, in Europe, and in other "danger spots" around the world. A communist military victory in Vietnam would thus increase the risk of war in other parts of the world. But if the communists failed, the incentive for aggression and war would diminish and peace would increase. The key to peace was America's commitment and willingness to resist aggression.¹⁰⁴

The President thus remained defiant in the face of the Easter Offensive and insisted that the U.S. would not be defeated and would "never surrender our friends to Communist aggression," but he pleaded with the country for the stamina to reach peace with honor rather than peace at any price. The war was ending. Vietnamization was working. South Vietnam was now bearing "the brunt of the battle" and the day "when no more Americans will be involved there at all" was coming closer and closer. But as the United States came "to the end of this long and difficult struggle" they

¹⁰² Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," April 26, 1972; "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," May 8, 1972, APP.

¹⁰³ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," April 30, 1970, APP.

¹⁰⁴ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," April 26, 1972, APP.

could not falter – “For all that we have risked and all that we have gained over the years now hangs in the balance,” Nixon declared. Without a doubt, the Nixon administration would end the war in Vietnam, but the President wanted to end the war “in such a way that the younger brothers and the sons of the brave men who have fought in Vietnam will not have to fight again in some other Vietnam at some time in the future.” The stakes of war and peace were too high for the U.S. to seek peace at any price. If the United States betrayed and abandoned the South Vietnamese, the President of the United States would forfeit his due respect and the U.S. would forfeit its role as the leader of the free world. Peace without honor “would amount to a renunciation of our morality, an abdication of our leadership among nations, and an invitation for the mighty to prey upon the weak all around the world.” Nixon therefore begged for the country to unite for “real peace – not the peace of surrender, but peace with honor – not just peace in our time, but peace for generations to come.”¹⁰⁵ He therefore pleaded with North Vietnam to accept a peaceful settlement in Indochina, he promised continued support against aggression to South Vietnam, and asked the American people to accept peace with honor and reject peace with surrender.¹⁰⁶

Later that summer, Nixon and Kissinger discussed the effects of the bombing, mining, and blockade on the North on August 2 and they each acknowledged that the North Vietnamese hated them, and for good reason considering the cruelties they had committed. Kissinger remarked, “they would love it best if you got defeated.

“Oh, sure,” Nixon replied, “Or shot.”

“Or shot, or anything. You could disappear from the scene,” Kissinger continued, “They hate you, and they hate me. I mean, they know who did this.”

¹⁰⁵ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” April 26, 1972, APP.

¹⁰⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” May 8, 1972, APP.

The President acknowledged what they had done to the North, but he justified the brutal campaign because it was not completely unlimited and the purpose was not actually to kill Vietnamese, but to extract a moral agreement from an immoral war that would preserve South Vietnam and enable the United States to leave Vietnam with honor. Killing civilians and destroying Hanoi and Haiphong were not ends in themselves but means to a greater good. “Let’s face it Henry,” Nixon stated, “we didn’t do the mining for fun. That mining and that bombing has got to be hurting these bastards.” The President remained undeterred, however, “we’re going to take the heart of... the installations in Hanoi... We’re going to take out the whole goddamn dock area, ships or no ships.” It wouldn’t be completely unrestrained or merciless, however. They would tell the Vietnamese to clear out and would stay away from the Chinese border, but Nixon considered taking out the Red River dikes too – “not for the purpose of killing people,” the President clarified, but to force North Vietnam to negotiate an acceptable peace.¹⁰⁷ Nixon and Kissinger, therefore, appeared to accept that the campaign against North Vietnam was immoral. But they nevertheless believed that doing evil was necessary and ultimately justified in order to do good because the campaign would save American lives, ensure South Vietnam’s self-determination, and guarantee peace with honor for the United States.

¹⁰⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 224.*

A Decent Interval

Nixon and Kissinger also justified the attacks on Hanoi and Haiphong because they seemed to be working. During their same conversation on August 2, Kissinger reported that North Vietnam's intransigence had suddenly softened in Paris. He told Nixon that his recent meeting was "the longest meeting we've ever had. It was the most complex." At one point, the delegations took a recess for an hour and fifteen minutes "where, for the first time, they served us a hot meal and offered us whiskey, and wine, and tea." North Vietnam still complained about the bombing in the North and Kissinger told them they had the power to stop it. "Why don't you tell us, privately, you're going to reduce the intensity of your fighting. I promise you we'll reduce the intensity of our bombing," Kissinger told them, cynically. After that, the North Vietnamese "pulled out a long statement, which is the most comprehensive proposal they've ever made. The first, I would say, negotiating proposal they've made."¹ Among other things, North Vietnam dropped their demand for the United States to withdraw all of its forces unconditionally.²

Nixon and Kissinger debated though whether they should accept North Vietnam's peace proposal. Making peace with Hanoi would effectively betray Saigon and both men felt the U.S. could not accept the proposal for political and moral reasons. Kissinger felt that "a McGovern victory would be worse than a sellout in Vietnam."³

"[I]t depends upon how much of a price we have to pay," Nixon countered. For the President, the "real question" was whether the U.S. should "settle at a cost of destroying the South Vietnamese." The political advantage of settling now, with a ten-point lead, Nixon explained, was

¹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 224.*

² *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 251.*

³ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 224.*

“you assure a hell of a landslide. And you might win the House and get increased strength in the Senate... You’d have a mandate in the country.”

“And you have the goddamned nightmare off your back,” Kissinger added.

Nixon agreed, “it is a nightmare. It’s a nightmare being there.” But the President was still not sure how far the U.S. could go “in good conscience” in making peace with the communists – not only because of the effect on South Vietnam, but on other countries around the world. Kissinger considered the peace proposal a serious offer and did not see how they could afford not to accept it. If North Vietnam’s offer was published, “it will be very embarrassing to us. It gives us a tough problem domestically,” Kissinger explained. Nixon returned to the moral and political problem of leaving Vietnam without abandoning Southeast Asia to communism and without jeopardizing American credibility. The President stated, “We have suffered long and hard, and God knows how do we get out of it. All it is, is a question of getting out in a way that to other countries – not the Chinese or the Russians so much, they don’t give a damn how it’s settled, just that we’re out – but to other countries, it does not appear that we, after four years, bugged out.”⁴

At the end of the August, Kissinger talked with Ambassador Bunker about how South Vietnam felt about North Vietnam’s peace proposal. Kissinger assured Bunker that the U.S. was not about to sellout Saigon and would do whatever it took to procure an honorable peace settlement. “We haven’t sacrificed all these years in order to sell out now,” he told the Ambassador. “If you think this is unreasonable, we’ll change it. And we’ll pay whatever price we have to.” At the very least, Kissinger proposed holding out until November because, after the election, the administration would be “in a unique position.” He told Bunker, “We have never had a mandate for an honorable

⁴ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 224.*

end to the war” and, if Nixon prevailed against McGovern, the U.S. could use its electoral victory to compel North Vietnam to accept American terms.⁵

In a letter to Thieu, President Nixon reassured the South Vietnamese President that the United States would not betray its ally by accepting Hanoi’s peace offer and betraying Saigon. Nixon declared,

The United States has not persevered all this way, at the sacrifice of many American lives, to reverse course in the last few months of 1972. We will not do now what we have refused to do in the preceding three and a half years. The American people know that the United States cannot purchase peace or honor or redeem its sacrifices at the price of deserting a brave ally. This I cannot do and will never do.⁶

Nixon thus affirmed that the United States was still dedicated to achieving peace with honor in Vietnam. The President had frequently asserted that the United States was willing to pay the price of peace and by that he meant that the U.S. would exact and endure the costs of war necessary to achieve an acceptable, honorable settlement that would preserve South Vietnam’s self-determination. In the months after North Vietnam’s peace proposal, however, the willingness to pay the price of peace came to mean that the United States would sacrifice its integrity and its ally in order to reach a peace settlement. Bedeviled by Hanoi’s obstinance, Saigon’s pertinacity, and American badgering, Washington reached an impasse in its negotiations and ultimately applied diplomatic pressure to South Vietnam and military pressure on North Vietnam in order to procure a peace agreement that would allow the United States to exit Vietnam. U.S. officials expected North Vietnam to violate the Paris Peace Accords that were finally signed in January 1973, but once the Vietnam War was over for the United States, Americans and their leaders no longer cared about the honor of the agreement. By 1973, therefore, peace with honor had turned into peace at any price.

⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 254.*

⁶ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. VIII, Vietnam, January-October 1972, no. 254.*

THE THROES OF PEACE

Finally, in a meeting in Paris on October 11, the U.S. and North Vietnamese delegations achieved a breakthrough and produced a peace agreement. The meeting began at 9:50 A.M. and at two in the morning on October 12, after sixteen hours of negotiations, Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho completed a tentative agreement to settle the Vietnam War.⁷

Kissinger immediately returned to the States to tell Nixon the grand news. “Well, you got three out of three, Mr. President. It’s well on the way,” he announced triumphantly.

“You got an agreement? Are you kidding?” Nixon responded.

“No, I’m not kidding,” Kissinger replied. “But the deal we got, Mr. President, is so far better than anything we dreamt of. I mean it was absolutely, totally hard line with them.”

Nixon was thrilled with the news but worried that the United States had been compelled to give up some of its demands. “Won’t it totally wipe out Thieu, Henry?” he asked.

“Oh no,” Kissinger explained. “It’s so far better than anything we discussed. He won’t like it because he thinks he’s winning,” but the agreement would allow Thieu to stay in power.

Nixon seemed almost doubtful and asked what had caused Hanoi’s sudden change of heart – “are they afraid we’re going to nuke ‘em? Or just hang on for another ten years –?”

Kissinger reassured the President that the agreement would ensure peace with honor for the United States. “[I]t has to be with honor,” Nixon rejoined, “But also it has to be in terms of getting out. We cannot continue to have this cancer eating at us at home, eating at us abroad.” If the North

⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, nos. 6, 9.*

Vietnamese turned on them, Nixon declared that he was not above hurting them. “I am not going to allow the United States to be destroyed in this thing.”

Kissinger assuaged the President again, “we’re getting out with honor,” he insisted.⁸

As Kissinger explained the main points of the peace agreement, he mentioned that the United States had agreed to pay reparations to North Vietnam to help reconstruct their society. The President accepted eagerly. “I’d give them everything because I see those poor – North Vietnamese kids burning with napalm and it burns my heart,” he announced. Kissinger read the paragraph about reparations from the agreement draft, and Nixon said it was no problem:

Give ’em – give ’em 10 billion, because I believe in this. I really do believe in it. The fact is if we did it with the Germans, we did it with the Japs, why not for these poor bastards? Don’t you agree, Henry? Don’t you agree, Henry? Goddamnit, I feel for these people. I mean they fought for the wrong reasons, but damn it to hell, I am not – I just feel for people that fight down, and bleed, and get killed.

The news about the agreement had certainly liberalized the President’s mood and, perhaps in his glee about what the U.S. had attained in Paris, he grew more charitable. That night, as he, Kissinger, Haig, and Haldeman went to dinner, Nixon unstintingly told his valet, Manolo Sanchez, to bring the good wine and serve it to everyone, instead of reserving it for the President alone as usual. Momentarily, at least, Kissinger’s announcement apparently softened Nixon. The President who had belittled the North Vietnamese and threatened to bomb them to smithereens now exhibited a grudging admiration and showed his humanitarianism.⁹

Nixon and Kissinger continued to debate whether or not Thieu would accept the agreement, but they agreed that “Thieu did not pose an insurmountable problem and that Kissinger would be able to obtain Thieu’s approval when he made his trip to Saigon the following week. Kissinger was

⁸ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 9.*

⁹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 9.*

exultant, Haldeman recalled but, despite their victorious optimism, “he must have known, and the President certainly knew, that this was not the achievement for which we had hoped.” The U.S. had obtained a peace agreement and that itself was cause for celebration after years of fighting and talking with no end in sight. But Haldeman suggested that Kissinger knew that Thieu would not accept the peace and that Hanoi would not abide by it. Furthermore, he understood that the only stipulation that made the peace tolerable was the presumed promise that the United States would come to South Vietnam’s rescue when the North violated the settlement. Haldeman explained, “What made it acceptable on the moral level were the underlying, unilateral guarantees to Thieu that we would punish infractions by the North with massive American military power, and the assumption that our influence with Moscow would be sufficient to cut the flow of military supplies to the NVA.”¹⁰ Haldeman insinuated, however, that Kissinger doubted whether Congress, the American public, and even the White House had the will to save Saigon. In short, Haldeman contended that the agreement made honorable promises that could be construed as a moral peace, but the U.S. would likely not live up to them.

The 1972 Presidential Campaign

“Peace with honor” had been Richard Nixon’s campaign slogan for the 1972 presidential election and now, buoyed by the peace agreement with North Vietnam, the President preached to Americans about the importance of ending the war on acceptable terms. In a series of addresses leading up to the election on November 7, Nixon delivered a consistent message about the meaning and importance of peace with honor in Vietnam. At rallies across the country – from Huntington, West Virginia, and Ashland, Kentucky, to Saginaw, Chicago, Tulsa, Providence, Greensboro, and

¹⁰ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 9.*

Albuquerque – Nixon explained how his administration had turned the fortunes of war in Vietnam towards an acceptable peace and set the United States on a path for peace around the world.

Peace with honor required a series of prevailing conditions in Vietnam that would allow the United States to end its involvement in the war and permit South Vietnam to determine its own political future. Nixon had outlined these conditions in his ultimatum on May 8, and he repeated his demands throughout the year. To achieve peace with honor, the United States demanded a ceasefire and an end to the killing in Indochina; the return of all American prisoners of war, and an accounting of those missing in action; and the people of South Vietnam had to have “the right to determine their own future without having a Communist government imposed upon them against their will by force.”¹¹ If the United States terminated its involvement without those conditions, Nixon claimed, the U.S. would suffer a humiliating and debilitating “peace with surrender.”¹²

The President thought the U.S. would achieve its goals after October 26 when he announced, less than two weeks before the election, that the administration had just made “a significant breakthrough in the peace negotiations.”¹³ Although some details and ambiguities in the agreement still had to be cleared up, Nixon again insisted that the United States could not simply end the war because those details marked the difference between peace and peace with honor –

¹¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks in Ashland, Kentucky,” October 26, 1972; “Address to the Nation: ‘Look to the Future,’” November 2, 1972; “Remarks at Chicago, Illinois,” November 3, 1972, APP.

¹² See the following speeches for references to “peace with surrender” or some variation: Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at Huntington, West Virginia,” and “Remarks in Ashland, Kentucky,” October 26, 1972; “Radio Address on the American Farmer,” October 27, 1972; “Remarks at Saginaw, Michigan,” October 28, 1972; “Address to the Nation: ‘Look to the Future,’” November 2, 1972; “Remarks at Chicago, Illinois,” and “Remarks at Tulsa, Oklahoma,” and “Remarks at Providence, Rhode Island,” November 3, 1972; “Remarks at Greensboro, North Carolina,” and “Remarks at Albuquerque, New Mexico,” and “Statement on Concluding Campaign for Reelection,” and “Remarks at Ontario, California,” November 4, 1972; “Radio Address: ‘The Birthright of an American Child,’” November 5, 1972; “Remarks on Election Eve,” November 6, 1972, APP.

¹³ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at Huntington, West Virginia,” October 26, 1972, APP. For other references to the diplomatic breakthrough, see Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at Saginaw, Michigan,” October 28, 1972; “Address to the Nation: ‘Look to the Future,’” November 2, 1972; “Remarks at Tulsa, Oklahoma,” and “Remarks at Providence, Rhode Island,” November 3, 1972; “Remarks at Greensboro, North Carolina,” and “Remarks at Albuquerque, New Mexico,” November 4, 1972; “Remarks on Election Eve,” November 6, 1972, APP.

between a temporary settlement and an effective enduring peace. He empathized with Americans who wanted peace as soon as possible and even claimed to be the greatest peace-seeker of all. Because he had to write to the wives and mothers of the dead, saw the wounded, and talked to the families of POWs, he professed to want peace more than anyone else. But the United States could not simply end the war unilaterally and salve its national ego. The war had to be ended the right way, honorably, so that in its haste for peace the United States did not hasten future conflicts. Peace could not lay the foundations for a later conflict as it had in the past. That is why Nixon insisted on peace with honor, he explained. The war had to be ended in a way that would discourage future aggression. Nixon thus contended that it was not enough to simply stop the fighting in Vietnam. If the United States wanted a lasting peace, it would have to secure peace on its (his) honorable terms, rather than an unconditional and dishonorable peace with surrender. The President was confident, however, that the United States would soon reach an agreement on all issues and end the war in Southeast Asia. Peace with honor would be “a great accomplishment,” he stated modestly.¹⁴

Nixon also resisted making peace immediately because he claimed that, in its haste, the United States had missed previous opportunities to secure lasting peace. In 1968, he asserted, the Johnson administration had agreed to halt the bombing of North Vietnam just before the election without working out all of the details only to have North Vietnam escalate its attacks. The U.S. could not repeat those mistakes and tolerate a resumption of the war after the agreement had been signed.¹⁵ Thus, Nixon declared that the U.S. was not going to “allow an election deadline or any

¹⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks in Ashland, Kentucky,” October 26, 1972, APP. See also, Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at a Campaign Reception for Southern Supporters in Atlanta, Georgia,” October 12, 1972; “Remarks at Huntington, West Virginia,” October 26, 1972; “Address to the Nation: ‘Look to the Future,’” November 2, 1972; “Remarks at Chicago, Illinois,” and “Remarks at Tulsa, Oklahoma,” and “Remarks at Providence, Rhode Island,” November 3, 1972; “Remarks at Greensboro, North Carolina,” and “Remarks at Albuquerque, New Mexico,” and “Remarks at Ontario, California,” November 4, 1972; “Remarks on Election Eve,” November 6, 1972, APP.

¹⁵ For Nixon’s complaints about the bombing halt by the Johnson administration see, Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation: ‘Look to the Future,’” November 2, 1972; “Remarks at Tulsa, Oklahoma,” November 3, 1972; “Remarks at Providence, Rhode Island,” November 3, 1972, “Remarks at Greensboro, North Carolina,” November

other kind of deadline” force his administration to sign an agreement that would turn out to be “only a temporary truce and not a lasting peace.” When the agreement was right and honorable, the U.S. would sign it, “without one day’s delay.”¹⁶

In his campaign addresses, Nixon further argued that the United States needed peace with honor because the country had not enjoyed a genuine lasting peace since before the First World War. Peace did not prevail after the armistice in 1918 and soon the world was engulfed in a second global war. After World War II, Americans thought the world would have “real peace” but then they fought the Korean War. When the armistice in Korea was signed, Americans felt relieved because communist forces in North Korea had been contained and South Korea retained its independence and freedom. Just a few years later, however, American soldiers were fighting once again in Vietnam.¹⁷

“Above all,” Nixon declared, “I want to complete the foundations for a world at peace – so that the next generation can be the first in this century to live without war and without the fear of war.”¹⁸ The major goal of his administration, he declared in Chicago, was “peace in the world... peace for the next generation.”¹⁹ Peace with honor in Vietnam, therefore, was part of a larger program for “lasting peace in the world” and Nixon was proud of his administration’s achievements beyond Southeast Asia. Under his watch, the United States had brought home half a million American soldiers, reduced U.S. casualties by 98 percent, and nearly stopped the fighting in Vietnam. Through Nixon’s trips to Peking and Moscow, the United States had also cultivated a new

4, 1972; “Remarks at Albuquerque, New Mexico,” November 4, 1972; “Remarks at Ontario, California,” November 4, 1972, APP. Of course, Nixon failed to mention the steps that his own campaign had taken in 1968 to undermine Johnson’s peace talks in order to win the presidency.

¹⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation: ‘Look to the Future,’” November 2, 1972, APP.

¹⁷ For the president’s peaceless chronology see Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at Huntington, West Virginia,” October 26, 1972; “Remarks at Chicago, Illinois,” and “Remarks at Providence, Rhode Island,” November 3, 1972, APP.

¹⁸ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation: ‘Look to the Future,’” November 2, 1972, APP.

¹⁹ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at Chicago, Illinois,” November 3, 1972, APP.

relationship with China, and forged agreements with the USSR. Nixon claimed the U.S. had also brought peace to the Middle East and the president hoped that these efforts would culminate in a “generation of peace” that Americans had not experienced since before World War I. In fact, Nixon claimed that 1972 had witnessed “more progress toward true peace in the world than any year since the end of World War II.” He did not mean that the U.S. had achieved total peace, and he acknowledged the serious differences between the government and philosophy of the United States and those of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. But Nixon contended that those differences must not create enemies and lead to war because the U.S. could not afford to fight a billion Chinese in ten or twenty years, and the U.S. did not want a confrontation with the USSR that could lead to a nuclear war no one could win. But as his administration had worked towards peaceful coexistence with the communist poles, the president felt that the world had moved from a hopeless situation with great powers sleepwalking towards “an inevitable collision” to a hopeful situation where all sides could negotiate and settle their differences “at the conference table.” Nixon did not hold out “the certainty that there will not be conflict in the world” but he believed that “The chance for this new generation of Americans to grow up in a world without war for a whole generation” was better than at any time in the Twentieth Century.²⁰

Like his predecessors, however, Nixon insisted that to achieve future peace, the United States also had to remain strong. There was nothing shameful about being number two in football, the nation’s highest elected sports fan declared, but on the international field of play, the United States could never be second best. Only the United States could keep the world safe, and it could

²⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at Huntington, West Virginia,” October 26, 1972; “Remarks in Ashland, Kentucky,” October 26, 1972; “Remarks at Saginaw, Michigan,” October 28, 1972; “Address to the Nation: ‘Look to the Future,’” November 2, 1972; “Remarks at Chicago, Illinois,” November 3, 1972; “Remarks at Tulsa, Oklahoma,” November 3, 1972; “Remarks at Albuquerque, New Mexico,” November 4, 1972; “Remarks at Ontario, California,” November 4, 1972, APP.

only maintain peace as the most powerful nation in the world. “The day we become number two,” Nixon declared, “there is no other nation in the world, in the free world, that can deter aggression.” Nixon thus justified American strength by claiming that the United States was the savior of the world – doing for all other free nations what they could not do for themselves. The U.S. did not go to war for glory or territory and had fought since World War I to defend freedom and resist aggression. “The people of the United States are a peaceful people,” he proclaimed, and the U.S. was certainly not going to use its power for wicked purposes, “to destroy freedom or break the peace.” Some Americans may have thought American messianism or exceptionalism was “old-fashioned,” but Nixon warned that “the day America loses its moral values, its dedication to idealism and religion, [it would] cease to be a great country” and world peace would be in jeopardy.²¹

Nixon’s campaign thus framed the election as a choice between Richard Nixon and peace with honor on the one hand or George McGovern and peace with surrender on the other. Nixon asked for votes, not because of what he had accomplished in four years, but to enable him to finish the job and “build a structure of peace.”²² He did not suggest that the United States was about to enter “the millennium” but with four more years his administration could create a “generation of peace” for Americans and the rest of the world.²³ As he concluded his campaign, he expressed confidence that the United States would soon achieve “a fair and honorable peace in Vietnam” and, after it became clear that Nixon had crushed McGovern at the polls, the reelected president hoped that the country was moving toward a new era of peace with transformed relationships with the

²¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks in Ashland, Kentucky,” October 26, 1972. See also “Remarks at a Campaign Reception for Southern Supporters in Atlanta, Georgia,” October 12, 1972; “Remarks at Saginaw, Michigan,” October 28, 1972; “Remarks at Tulsa, Oklahoma,” and “Remarks at Providence, Rhode Island,” November 3, 1972; “Remarks at Albuquerque, New Mexico,” and “Remarks at Ontario, California,” November 4, 1972, APP.

²² Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at Chicago, Illinois,” November 3, 1972, APP.

²³ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at Huntington, West Virginia,” October 26, 1972; “Address to the Nation: ‘Look to the Future,’” November 2, 1972, APP.

USSR and PR China.²⁴ The greater the victory, the greater the opportunity, and the greater the responsibility, Nixon remarked at his victory rally the day after the election. The administration had a resounding national mandate to build world peace – “peace with honor throughout the world.”²⁵

Thieu’s Resistance

Just as Nixon and Kissinger had expected, President Thieu rejected the proposed peace agreement. Kissinger reported to General Haig on October 22, “Thieu refused all of this with the argument that he would accept no political prescriptions in any form.” The National Security Advisor nevertheless encouraged everyone to display optimism and act as if peace was at hand, but he warned, however, that Thieu’s intransigence could undermine the moral standing of the United States. “At all cost we must avoid letting Thieu become the object of public scorn, not for his sake but for our own,” Kissinger advised. “If Thieu emerges as the villain, even if we finally overcome his objections, everything that we have done for the past eight years will be thrown into question.” The Nixon administration could not be seen protecting and upholding the greatest obstacle to peace. Kissinger still expected Thieu to yield, eventually, but, if he did not, Washington and Hanoi would likely sign an agreement without him which “would give Thieu an opportunity to claim that he was raped.” In the end, he would consent, but Kissinger advised that the U.S. should make a “purely bilateral deal only as a last resort.” Thieu was “unfortunately paranoiac,” but Kissinger assured that the U.S. would be home free if it could just overcome this last annoying obstacle. As he told Haig, “If all of us can now keep our sense of perspective and not panic in the face of this temporary bad turn, we will still be able to get nearly everything we have sought.”²⁶ Everything the U.S. had sought

²⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Statement on Concluding Campaign for Reelection,” November 4, 1972; “Remarks at Huntington, West Virginia,” October 26, 1972; “Address to the Nation: ‘Look to the Future,’” November 2, 1972; “Remarks at Chicago, Illinois,” November 3, 1972; “Remarks at Tulsa, Oklahoma,” November 3, 1972; “Remarks on Election Eve,” November 6, 1972; “Remarks on Being Reelected to the Presidency,” November 7, 1972, APP.

²⁵ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at a Presidential Election Victory Rally,” November 8, 1972; see also “Radio Address: ‘One America,’” October 28, 1972, APP.

²⁶ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973*, no. 48.

apparently did not include South Vietnam's approval. Nixon had long claimed that the United States would not end the Vietnam War unless it could produce a solution that would save and satisfy South Vietnam. But now, U.S. leaders seemed to be forcing an agreement on the South that was unacceptable to Saigon which suggests that the United States was no longer committed to honorable peace it had sought since 1969.

Kissinger also encouraged the President to halt U.S. bombing in order to get the peace agreement across the finish line. He knew Nixon did not want to make the same mistake as Johnson and stop the bombing before an agreement was finalized but Kissinger believed that the U.S. had little choice and that a bombing halt could help complete the negotiations and win the U.S. some moral points. Kissinger accepted that the U.S. had "a moral case for bombing North Vietnam when it does not accept our proposals," but he thought bombing would be disingenuous and cruel when Hanoi had accepted the peace agreement and *Saigon* had not. Of course, if the U.S. stopped the bombing and North Vietnam refused to deal, the U.S. could always resume bombing "with all the greater effect," but Kissinger saw "nothing but disaster in mock toughness now." Moscow and Peking were not likely to lend a hand in pressuring Hanoi without a bombing halt and the American people would not think that Nixon was getting soft because they would know the U.S. was close to an agreement.²⁷

Tho's Resistance

Despite the initial agreement in October, negotiations with North Vietnam soon reached an impasse over South Vietnam's concerns and the new American terms which the U.S. had submitted after Nixon's landslide victory and supposed mandate. Kissinger warned Le Duc Tho on November 24 that the United States was prepared to walk away from the conference table and un-limit its

²⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 48.*

military activity to ensure peace with honor. He read a telegram he had received from the President the night before:

Under the circumstances, unless the other side shows the same willingness to be reasonable that we are showing, I am directing you to discontinue the talks and we shall then have to resume military activity until the other side is ready to negotiate. They must be disabused of the idea they seem to have that we have no other choice but to settle on their terms. You should inform them directly without equivocation that we do have another choice and... with the election behind us, [the President] will take whatever action he considers necessary to protect the United States' interest.

Nixon and Kissinger explained that the final agreement had to show that South Vietnam's views had been considered. The President was prepared to intervene and pressure Saigon to accept the settlement, but the United States could not sign a peace agreement "in good conscience" without a "moral basis." In other words, if North Vietnam took advantage of the U.S. and used the agreement to infringe on American and South Vietnamese principles, the U.S. would consider the peace dishonorable and "the war would continue with greater violence." As Kissinger put it, "The U.S. was at a point where its cupboards were empty."²⁸

Le Duc Tho balked at the American demands – "what did the United States expect of North Vietnam?" he asked. President Nixon had referred to American honor, "North Vietnam had its honor also," he explained. Tho argued that Hanoi had already made substantial concessions and now the United States was taking advantage of North Vietnam. He agreed that "with peace so near we should not now return to war," but Tho did not know how he could sell U.S. demands to the North Vietnamese. In effect, Tho answered Kissinger with the same exasperated claims. The two sides could either restore peace or resume the war. "War would not be by desire or by an unwillingness to reach an agreement. But North Vietnamese good will had its limits," he declared. Hanoi did not want to continue the war, but it could not make concessions that would amount to "a

²⁸ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 122.*

camouflaged surrender.” Hanoi wanted peace but “if peace was impossible the war would continue.” Kissinger claimed that North Vietnam would be responsible, Tho contended that the United States would be responsible.²⁹

THE CHRISTMAS BOMBING

Without a way through the impasse, Nixon told Kissinger later that day that he was prepared to authorize a massive strike on North Vietnam. “I recognize that this is a high risk option,” the President acknowledged, but he was prepared to take the step if the only alternative was a bad peace agreement. The United States was caught between its intransigent enemy and its equally intransigent ally and Nixon directed Kissinger to “take a hard line with Saigon and an equally hard line with Hanoi.” The President refused to make a dissatisfactory and dishonorable peace – “we cannot make a bad deal” just because the country had built up “massive expectations” for an agreement that would result in “an equally massive let down if bombing were resumed,” he announced. The goal, he insisted one more time, was “to end the war with honor.” Nixon realized that the urge for peace was so strong at this point that his administration would not be able to mobilize public support for a resumed bombing campaign but, “with the election behind us, we owe it to the sacrifice that has been made to date by so many to do what is right even though the cost in our public support will be massive.”³⁰ According to Nixon then, peace with honor did not simply advance U.S. interests, it was also the right thing to do and his duty as President was to do the right thing, whether the American people knew it or not. Nixon knew that Americans would not endorse a breakdown in negotiations, but now that he felt he had a mandate for peace, Nixon did not feel beholden to the will of the

²⁹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 122.*

³⁰ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 123.*

people. The President remained committed to peace with honor, even if the people demanded peace at any price.

Peace for Prisoners

As the path to peace remained impassable, Kissinger wrote to Nixon on December 6 and suggested that, if negotiations broke down, the U.S. should “resume massive bombing” and flatten its objectives. Instead of working towards a comprehensive settlement which seemed more and more impossible, the U.S. should merely promise “military disengagement in return for the release of our prisoners.” This basic quid pro quo seemed to be the only way to extricate the United States from Vietnam given “the implacability of the two Vietnamese sides.” The U.S. would likely have to keep up its bombing, Kissinger thought, to make the deal work but, if the administration was “willing to pay the domestic and international price, rally the American people, and stay on our course,” the peace for prisoners agreement had “fewer risks” considering the GVN’s attitude.³¹

Trading peace for prisoners was not peace with honor. Indeed, Kissinger’s proposal would have cut South Vietnam out of the settlement altogether and simply negotiated an end to America’s involvement in the war without any regard for South Vietnam’s self-determination or the status of Thieu and the GVN. But Kissinger had become so aggravated by Saigon’s recalcitrance that he was willing to make peace at South Vietnam’s expense. Peace with honor, therefore, was turning more and more into peace with *American* honor, or even peace at any price.

Peace with honor became more self-interested as U.S. strategists became more frustrated with Hanoi and Saigon’s obduracy. The following week, on December 12, Nixon expressed his irritation to Haig and threatened to deal with North Vietnam without regard for South Vietnam.

³¹ FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 144.

Thieu's thorn was pushing deeper into the American side and Nixon believed the South Vietnamese President was an obstacle to peace – "he'll cut off our nose to spite our face, but he has really destroyed his usefulness, and, frankly, his credibility as far as our dealing with him on an equal basis from now on," Nixon stated. Haig said the same, "there can be no moral, or any other consideration, with respect to this guy from now on. We've got to play this on pure self-interest, totally." The problem, the President expounded, was that Saigon's interests were different than Washington's. "His interests are total, unconditional surrender of the enemy. Ours are an honorable withdrawal," Nixon illustrated. But by demanding total victory, Haig amplified, Thieu was sowing seeds of more conflict "if he insists on total surrender. He's not going to get it. He hasn't earned it. He hasn't won it on the battlefield." Perhaps Thieu could win the war and achieve total victory, Nixon admitted, "if we continue to bomb the shit out of [North Vietnam] forever." Haig remonstrated, "We just won't do it." The whole war was fundamentally impassable, the President complained, "Russia and China cannot allow North Vietnam to lose; we cannot allow South Vietnam to lose. That's where this war is at the present time."³²

Drained by Thieu's obstinacy, Nixon thus threatened to stop dealing him into the negotiations anymore and Haig's comment suggested that Thieu had exhausted whatever moral capital the U.S. claimed to have. The United States wanted to do the right thing, he indicated, but it simply could not afford to at the expense of its national interests.

Their conversation also highlighted the prevailing strategic views on victory and the costs the U.S. would accept to achieve it. Nixon reiterated that the United States was not aiming for total victory and unconditional surrender and Haig noted that demands for unconditional surrender were immoral, insofar as they prolonged the war needlessly. Total victory was also impossible if South

³² *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 161.*

Vietnam could not win on the battlefield and when Nixon suggested that it might be possible with three or four more years of Rolling Thunder, Haig indicated that the U.S. did not have the will to carry it out. Victory was not possible in Vietnam at an acceptable cost.

Pressure on North Vietnam: Bombing Hanoi

Nixon was willing, however, to escalate the war in order to achieve a more honorable peace and get the United States out of Vietnam. If North Vietnam reneged on its agreement, “we’re going to bomb the hell out of ’em,” the President threatened. He felt annoyed though, that other officials like Admiral Moorer seemed unwilling to raise the level of violence in the war. “And that’s the thing I can’t get Moorer through his goddamn thick head. And he showed me some half-ass little thing,” Nixon griped. When he had talked to Moorer about bombing North Vietnam, the Admiral had suggested hitting communications targets or a power plant that had been bombed in 1968, or bridges that the North had rebuilt. Nixon wanted to unleash the Air Force, though. “What about the civilian airport?” he had asked. “Well there’s too much trouble with civilian casualties,” Moorer responded, but the U.S. could hit one side of it where there were military planes.³³

Moorer, at least, felt constrained by the laws or ethics of war and hesitated to attack targets which could result in civilian casualties. His principal concern and priority were to limit or avoid civilian losses and that meant keeping U.S. means limited. Nixon, on the other hand, prioritized U.S. objectives or ends and he felt frustrated that the Chairman of the JCS seemed unwilling to exact the kind of violence that would force Hanoi to concede.

Haig, however, understood the President’s wishes and suggested that the U.S. could take out a transshipment point and radio junction with B-52s. “And there’ll be some slop-over casualties, but goddamnit – so be it... That gets their attention,” Haig stated. Nixon said the same thing. Collateral

³³ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 161.*

damage was a small price to pay for an eventual peace settlement, they agreed. Damn the civilians, full speed ahead. In fact, the President wanted B-52s flying every night. “I feel we should go in, and take out every airfield in North Vietnam...Why not just take ’em all out? Like the Israelis took out the Egyptians’ airfields [in 1967]? Why not?” Haig pointed out that the airfields were not productive targets, but Nixon remonstrated, “Productive? The hell with it being productive! Just take ’em out.”

“It’d make a hell of an impression,” the general admitted.

“That’s right,” the President continued. “And just think: where the hell they going to land?”³⁴

On December 13, the day after his conversation with the President, Haig reiterated Nixon’s ideas about bombing in a memo to Kissinger. Haig wrote:

The President is adamantly opposed to increased bombing south of the 20th parallel. He states that this is generally a waste of ordnance and will mean nothing to Hanoi and may in fact deceive them into believing that this might constitute the limit of U.S. reaction. He believes that we take the same heat in any event and should therefore bomb massively north of the 20th once increased bombing commences.

To maximize the bombing’s psychological impact, the President wanted to eliminate the restraints on American bombers. The domestic cost to the Nixon administration would be the same so why not make the bombing as effective as possible? At the same time, Haig offered some recommendations to handle the public pressure that bombing would produce. He advised neither Kissinger nor the President to “attempt to explain this to the American public.” Rather, he thought White House Press Secretary Ron Zeigler should issue a “carefully worded statement... at a regular press conference,” but Zeigler would not be expected to explain the details of the peace talks. The statement would also emphasize the administration’s desires for peace “but make it clear that we

³⁴ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 161.*

would not accept peace at any price.” Consequently, Haig thought the statement should also avow that the bombing would not end until Hanoi signed the agreement.³⁵

Pressure on South Vietnam: Threats to Saigon

On December 17, Nixon commanded Thieu to get on board the peace train. “I have given you every opportunity to join with me in bringing peace with honor to the people of South Vietnam,” the President wrote in his letter – presuming to tell the President of South Vietnam what was acceptable to South Vietnam. Nixon said he was willing to incorporate Saigon’s concerns in the peace talks but, if Thieu continued to impede the peace process, the President was willing to move forward alone. In Nixon’s words, he wanted to “convey my irrevocable intention to proceed, preferably with your cooperation but, if necessary, alone.” In short, the United States would make peace with or without South Vietnam.³⁶

Nixon further warned that, if South Vietnam continued to resist collaborating towards peace, “it can only result in a fundamental change in the character of our relationship” because South Vietnam’s refusal “would be an invitation to disaster” and jeopardize everything that the U.S. and South Vietnam had fought for in the last ten years. Above all, the President wrote, South Vietnam’s refusal would be “inexcusable” because it would have forfeited “a just and honorable alternative.” This was Thieu’s last chance. Nixon presented an ultimatum: “The time has come for us to present a united front in negotiating with our enemies, and you must decide now whether you desire to continue to work together or whether you want me to seek a settlement with the enemy which serves U.S. interests alone.”³⁷

³⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 173.*

³⁶ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 189.*

³⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 189.*

Operation Linebacker II

On December 16, Nixon issued an ultimatum threatening to bomb North Vietnam if they did not return to the negotiating table and, when they refused, he authorized Operation Linebacker II and the U.S. Air Force to begin bombing North Vietnam on December 18. For eleven days, American B-52 Stratofortresses blasted North Vietnam and dropped 20,000 tons of bombs in the largest bombing campaign of the war and the largest strategic bombing campaign since World War II. At least 1,600 civilians were killed.

Air Force officials were ecstatic about the operation and believed that the strategic bombing campaign could win the war. General Curtis LeMay, now retired, recalled that once the U.S. “turned the B-52s loose up north,” he felt sure that the campaign could have won the war if the U.S. did not cut it short. “A few more days’ work and we would have been completely free without any casualties because all of the SAMs were gone by that time,” he insisted. “Their bases and warehouses supplying the SAM sites were gone, too. So it would have been a pretty free ride from then on, and we would have completely won the war.”³⁸

The bombing was never meant to win the war, however, because U.S. strategists had already ruled out military victory believing it was impossible and immoral. Instead, the goal of bombing was to exact a price that would force Hanoi back to the negotiating table. On December 27, Nixon talked with Richard T. Kennedy, a member of the NSC staff, and reiterated that he wanted the bombing to continue in order to compel Hanoi to accept U.S. demands. “Run it up,” Kennedy advised, “Run it up until they agree to the timetable.” In fact, Kennedy suggested that the U.S. continue bombing until North Vietnam agreed to sit down at the table again. After all, the most important thing was to end the war on American terms – that was what made peace honorable.

³⁸ Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 126.

“The thing that matters is that the war gets over in a way in which Thieu and his government can survive, a genuine elections [sic] can occur, and if they do, the present structure in Saigon will survive,” Kennedy stated. At this point, neither Nixon nor Kennedy thought North Vietnam could win the war “in a traditional sense of an enemy coming to its knees, and – begging to surrender.” South Vietnam also could not lose. With all the help that the U.S. had provided and “with the biggest, the most modern army in Southeast Asia... if they cannot now – win, they are never going to win,” Nixon exclaimed. The war came down to “will and guts” though. Kennedy asserted, “to give the devil his due, the North has come down there, time after time, under the most incredibly difficult circumstances and done well. Now, that’s all a matter of just plain will.” “They’ve got a greater will to win,” Nixon agreed, although he thought South Vietnam would be able to handle itself. The United States had to leave Vietnam, though. “We’ve got to get out of South Vietnam, and... go home. Unless the North comes back with ridiculously unacceptable demands, we settle. And the South’s going to have to go it alone. They can make it alone, if we don’t – if the Congress doesn’t cut off their aid.”³⁹

Nixon thus felt that the United States could make peace honorably at this point because South Vietnam could defend itself, but U.S. strategists had no illusions about the peace settlement and fully expected that war would continue. The most important objective now, however, was not to sustain Saigon but to get out of Vietnam. Once the U.S. was out, U.S. strategists would have fewer moral reasons to ensure South Vietnam’s survival.

THE END OF THE VIETNAM WAR

North Vietnam returned to the peace table for its own reasons while the Americans believed they had bombed Hanoi into submission but, either way, peace talks began again and soon produced

³⁹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 227.*

an agreement that Hanoi and Washington both tolerated. South Vietnam still rejected the peace proposal because it did not require North Vietnam to withdraw its forces and, on January 5, 1973, Kissinger reprimanded Tran Van Do, South Vietnam's Foreign Minister as well as Bui Diem and Tran Kim Phuong, the former and current ambassador to the U.S. at a meeting in Washington. "I know you want North Vietnamese troops to be withdrawn," Kissinger announced. He promised to raise the issue again but did not think North Vietnam would accept. Kissinger denied, however, that the U.S. had betrayed the South. "If we wanted to sell you out, we could have done this in November. Negotiations failed then because we were defending your point of view," he explained.⁴⁰

By protesting about the peace agreement, South Vietnam was making the settlement seem less honorable and Kissinger warned that it would hurt Saigon and Washington. "I am being brutally frank," he explained, "If this goes on much longer, Congress will cut off the funds. Resolutions are already being prepared. You are creating a situation where this agreement is being seen by the public as a defeat for us and for you." Kissinger would present the South's case again the next week but "it will again fail," he predicted. A better settlement with Hanoi was not possible.⁴¹

Kissinger also urged South Vietnam to accept the peace terms because the United States would not support the war any longer and was getting out of Vietnam one way or another. In particular, he accused liberals of trying to end the war in order to undermine the Nixon administration and destroy U.S. foreign policy. "Thus we are not merely interested in your defense for your sake. It is in our own interests that the Communists not take over Saigon," he declared. Accepting the settlement was in both of their interests. Kissinger further explained that a peace settlement was the only way for South Vietnam to qualify for additional aid. He reasoned:

⁴⁰ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 249.*

⁴¹ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 249.*

We have calculated that to survive you need our assistance, at least as long as they get assistance from their Communist allies. Now how do you get our assistance? In the name of war our aid will be cut off in the first three months. In the name of peace there is more chance. The Communists have no intention of keeping the major provisions. The agreement will never be fully implemented. With an army of over a million and controlling a large part of the territory, we think you can handle a ceasefire, at least for a long enough period until there are violations of the agreement. And there is no question about who will violate it. We thought that in the name of an agreement we would be better able to help than in the name of war. That is our cold-blooded appraisal.⁴²

Kissinger thus urged the South Vietnamese to accept the agreement because the peace settlement was only temporary. It was not an end to the war or a permanent solution to the Vietnam problem because he fully expected North Vietnam to violate the agreement. When it did, the United States would have a much stronger moral *casus belli* and Congress would be more willing to support South Vietnam.

Kissinger again argued that North Vietnam would not heed the peace agreement. “We do not assume that they will honor the provisions. Do you?” The South Vietnamese said no. What was the best way to safeguard against the likelihood that the war would resume “weeks or months after the agreement?” Do asked. That was what was most important to South Vietnam. Kissinger explained that if North Vietnam honored the provisions about withdrawing their forces from Cambodia and Laos and did not infiltrate the South, “they will not be able to resume the war.” He reasoned though that “if they break those provisions, it won’t help to have another provision that they won’t keep. There is no way they can resume the war without breaking the agreement,” he affirmed. Kissinger did not trust the North Vietnamese, though. “You know they are SOB’s,” he declared. “Excuse me for using that language. We are not talking about nature’s noblemen. They are

⁴² *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 249.*

the most miserable bastards. I have had a concentrated course for three years. I have never seen people who could lie so much. They are totally treacherous.”⁴³

But although he expected North Vietnam to betray the peace settlement, Kissinger reassured the South Vietnamese that American objectives had not changed. The U.S. still sought the independence and freedom of South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese remained skeptical and felt the United States was simply willing to have peace at any price. Bui Diem later wrote about the meeting, “Kissinger’s tone that morning was sharp, his mood defensive.” When Diem told him that the presence of North Vietnamese troops in the South after the ceasefire may not have been important to the U.S. but “it was a matter of life and death for us,” Kissinger replied that he understood and would submit the matter again and do what he could. “But this seemed to me a ritual response, uttered without any discernible conviction,” Diem wrote, and the South Vietnamese felt discouraged. “It was a disheartening meeting, devoid of any sign that Kissinger felt strong enough after the Christmas bombing to open up a new area in the talks, scheduled to reconvene in three days.”⁴⁴

On January 13, Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho finally concluded the peace agreement in Paris and both sides insisted that they would honor the settlement completely and exactly. Tho announced: “Since we have reached these agreements we should stick to them: The agreement on the text of the Agreement, the agreement on the understandings, and the agreement on the schedule. I agree with you that I will not change anything in the Agreement, in the understandings and in the schedule. I will also abide by these documents. This is a serious and honored promise on my part.” Kissinger made the same pledge: “I also consider the Agreement and the understandings and the protocols completed, and I undertake, on my part, that we will not request any change in them...

⁴³ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 249.*

⁴⁴ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 249.*

We will strictly observe the Agreement.” He pointed out, however, that “there have been many agreements in Indochina that have only been interludes in warfare. This should be an agreement that marks the beginning of genuine peace.”⁴⁵

Despite Saigon’s sincere doubts, U.S. strategists continued to insist that they would look after and provide for their ward in Southeast Asia which obscured the prospect of genuine peace for many Americans. As a *Washington Post* editorial observed on January 20:

the American combat involvement may be ending but the administration’s acceptance of a certain implied responsibility for the general state of affairs in South Vietnam and even for the fortunes of one political faction in Saigon, the Thieu government, is apparently not going to end. This is implicit in Mr. Nixon’s insistence on continuing to provide aid to the Thieu regime, on trying to negotiate with Hanoi the framework within which formal politics in South Vietnam will be conducted; on seeking to organize international participation in supervising the cease-fire and reconstructing Indochina; and especially in Mr. Nixon’s decision to keep bombers on hand in Thailand and offshore.⁴⁶

The President was apparently prepared to forget the promises to South Vietnam, though. The night before Nixon was to announce the victorious peace with honor, Kissinger called Haig and instructed, “under no circumstances let him drop out the reassurances to the South Vietnamese.” Nixon wanted to omit any promise to South Vietnam, but Kissinger told Haig not to allow it. “[T]ell him that this thing is precarious, tell him that it is promised and tell him Thieu might just collapse if it isn’t in there,” Kissinger ordered. Haig agreed and Kissinger continued, “just scare the pants off him.” The speech had to be “stern and not sappy” and “the warning to the Chinese and the Russians must stay in.”⁴⁷

January 23, 1973: Nixon’s Announcement

On January 23, 1973, three days after his second inauguration, President Nixon addressed the country from the Oval Office and announced that the United States had “concluded an

⁴⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 274.*

⁴⁶ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 327.*

⁴⁷ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 327.*

agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia.” Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho had signed the “Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam” and the other participants in the Paris Conference on Vietnam would formally sign the agreement on January 27.⁴⁸

With the agreement, Nixon declared that the United States had finally achieved peace with honor. A ceasefire would also take effect on January 27 and, during the following sixty days, all American forces would be withdrawn from South Vietnam, all American prisoners of war in Indochina would be released while those missing in action would be accounted for. Meanwhile, the people of South Vietnam would have “the right to determine their own future, without outside interference.” The United States would “continue to recognize the Government of the Republic of Vietnam as the sole legitimate government of South Vietnam” and would “continue to aid South Vietnam within the terms of the agreement.”⁴⁹

The President then justified the peace agreement and explained that it was more honorable than peace at any price because it had required steadfastness and selflessness. Nixon had always demanded “the right kind of peace” and he praised the American people for their steadfastness in working towards peace with honor. He was proud that the U.S. “did not settle for a peace that would have betrayed our allies, that would have abandoned our prisoners of war, or that would have ended the war for us but would have continued the war” for Indochina. The U.S. could also be proud of its soldiers “who served with honor and distinction in one of the most selfless enterprises

⁴⁸ “January 23, 1973,” President Richard Nixon's Daily Diary January 16, 1973 – January 31, 1973; Box RC-12, WHCH: SMOF: Office of Presidential Papers and Archives, Nixon Library.

⁴⁹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Conclusion of an Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam,” January 23, 1973, APP.

in the history of nations,” as well as those who gave their lives that “South Vietnam might live in freedom and so that the world might live in peace.”⁵⁰

Peace with honor, however, was only the beginning of peace in Indochina, the Pacific, and the world. Nixon told the country that “ending the war [was] only the first step toward building the peace.” All parties would have to do their part not only to end the war in Southeast Asia, but to contribute to world peace. He praised South Vietnam for winning the right of self-determination and called on North Vietnam to join the U.S. in building “a peace of reconciliation.” He also called on other major power to restrain themselves to ensure that peace would endure.⁵¹

Victory Through Peace

For the rest of the year, the remainder of his presidency, and, indeed, until the end of his life, Nixon insisted that the United States had achieved an honorable or moral peace in Vietnam and the Nixon administration presented that message at every opportunity. On January 25, Bob Haldeman instructed Kissinger to emphasize to Congress that the United States had achieved its major goals – peace with honor. The U.S. had negotiated both a political settlement and a peace agreement. The peace accords precluded a coalition government in South Vietnam and guaranteed the South’s self-determination without any communist government imposed upon them. The agreement also established peace in Southeast Asia. Haldeman explained, “The settlement we achieved, rather than being a bug-out which might have ended the war for us, is one that ends the war for the 50 million people of Indochina.” Haldeman implied, therefore, that the U.S. had negotiated a moral settlement that not only fulfilled American national interests but unselfishly provided for South Vietnam as

⁵⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Conclusion of an Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam,” January 23, 1973, APP.

⁵¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Conclusion of an Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam,” January 23, 1973, APP.

well. The U.S. could have looked out for number one but instead fought to secure an acceptable peace for the people of Indochina:

the prisoners for withdrawal proposal would have meant that the United States would get out and let the war go ahead. In other words, it would end the war for us and have the war continue for those that remained with 1,000 casualties a week at least ad infinitum. What we have done by sticking in there was to get a peace which ends the war for the long-suffering people of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos as well.

Haldeman wanted Kissinger to highlight those points in his testimony and defend the administration. Nixon's opponents in Congress and the media "wanted to end the war in Vietnam with dishonor and what amounted really to an abject surrender and defeat for the United States," Haldeman claimed, but "We persisted in seeing it through until the war was ended with honor." If their opponents had had their way, South Vietnam would have had a communist coalition government or a completely communist government. In contrast, Haldeman declared, "We have ended in a way that assures the people of South Vietnam the right to determine their own future in free, internationally supervised elections, which means that there will be no Communist government unless the people want it and this is something that no one anticipates will really happen."⁵²

In sum, Haldeman accused the administration's opponents of pursuing an immoral peace by accepting peace at any price, but he insisted that the Nixon administration had held out and achieved a moral peace with honor. Their opponents "were only interested in getting peace for America and would have ended our involvement in a way that would have allowed the war to continue indefinitely for the long-suffering people of Indochina." Haldeman thus charged Democrats, liberals, and doves of hypocrisy – pretending to care about Vietnamese lives without fighting for a peace that would preserve them. The Nixon administration, in contrast, had shown genuine concern for the people of Indochina by fighting and talking their way to a settlement that

⁵² *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, no. 335.*

would serve the region and its people, not just Americans. “In other words,” Haldeman declared, “peace with honor means peace with independence for South Vietnam and peace for the people of Southeast Asia. Peace with surrender and dishonor means peace for us but a Communist government for South Vietnam and continued war for the 50 million people of Indochina.”⁵³

Because his administration had never aimed to win the war, Nixon argued that peace with honor was the equivalent of victory and he insisted that the United States had *won* peace with honor. “I know it gags some of you to write that phrase, but it is true,” the President told the press eight days after his announcement. If the U.S. had “bugged out” and permitted “the imposition of a Communist government” it would have been “peace with dishonor.”⁵⁴

Two months after the peace agreement, in what would be his last nationally televised address on Vietnam, Nixon spoke from the Oval Office on March 29 and told how his administration had reversed the fortunes of battle, lifted the United States out of the Vietnamese quagmire, and won the war. For the umpteenth time, he reminded the country that when he had first taken office more than 500,000 Americans were in Vietnam, 300 were dying every week, the U.S. had made zero progress in its peace talks, and the war had no end in sight. But after his inauguration, Nixon had “immediately initiated a program to end the war and win an honorable peace.” Now, “For the first time in 12 years, no American military forces are in Vietnam,” he proclaimed; all American POWs were on their way home, and South Vietnam had “the right to choose their own government without outside interference.” These realities, he claimed, indicated that his strategies had worked. Vietnamization had empowered South Vietnam to defend its right to self-determination and the United States had “prevented the imposition of a Communist government by force on South Vietnam.”⁵⁵

⁵³ *FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. IX, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973*, no. 335.

⁵⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “The President’s News Conference,” January 31, 1973, APP.

⁵⁵ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation About Vietnam and Domestic Problems,” March 29, 1973, APP.

In his speeches, President Nixon also affirmed that the peace in Vietnam was honorable not just because it was effective but because it was moral. By achieving peace with honor, the United States had shown steadfastness, preserved American credibility, and contained communism. Despite its hard decisions and grievous losses, Nixon felt the ends justified the means because peace with honor had ended the war quickly, saved American lives, and offered the possibility of world peace. Ultimately, he believed peace with honor was moral because its outcomes were worth the cost.

After declaring peace with honor, Nixon repeatedly praised the country (and his administration) for steadfastly working for their goals in Vietnam rather than settling for peace at any price. The war had been long and costly, but the President felt Americans should be proud that their country “stuck it out” until they had achieved their objectives.⁵⁶ Despite “an unprecedented barrage of criticism from a small but vocal minority,” the majority of Americans had faithfully supported peace with honor, he announced on March 29. When Nixon had ordered attacks on communist sanctuaries in Cambodia, the mining of Haiphong, and airstrikes against North Vietnam, American protestors screamed, but because “the overwhelming majority” of Americans supported Nixon’s hard decisions instead of “peace at any price,” the United States was able to avoid defeat and humiliation.⁵⁷

Because the U.S. had steadfastly resisted immediate, unilateral, and unconditional withdrawal, peace with honor had also saved and strengthened America’s global credibility. The Nixon administration could have taken the easy way out, but the President celebrated that the U.S. had passed through the fiery trial of Vietnam “without surrendering to despair and without dishonoring” American ideals.⁵⁸ Nixon maintained that it was also important to end the war “the

⁵⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks to a Joint Session of the South Carolina General Assembly,” February 20, 1973, APP.

⁵⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation About Vietnam and Domestic Problems,” March 29, 1973, APP.

⁵⁸ Richard M. Nixon, “State of the Union Message to the Congress: Overview and Goals,” February 2, 1973; “Remarks About United States Relations With Europe,” February 15, 1973, APP.

right way” in order to show American friends and adversaries that the U.S. was a dependable ally. If the United States had “bugged out of Vietnam, we would not be worth talking to anyplace in the world today,” the President affirmed.⁵⁹ But because of peace with honor “America’s word is trusted and America’s strength is respected, all around the world.”⁶⁰

Peace with honor also meant the United States had fought with honor and had prevented the United States from losing the Vietnam War. After declaring peace with honor, Nixon defended the hard military decisions he had made by suggesting that the ends for peace justified the means. At the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in New Orleans on August 20, 1973, Nixon defended the secret bombing of Cambodia in 1969. The President explained that North Vietnam, not the United States, had violated Cambodian sovereignty and neutrality; that American airstrikes targeted only North Vietnamese forces; that the secrecy was necessary to achieve its military objectives; and that the bombing had saved American lives. He also defended his decision in May 1972 to mine Haiphong harbor. Protestors reacted like it would “bring on world war III” but Nixon contended that the attacks actually brought North Vietnam to the negotiating table and led to the end of the war. He likewise defended the Christmas Bombing which had hit military targets in Hanoi in December 1972. Although each of those decisions had been difficult, Nixon maintained that with each decision he had tried to end the war honorably and “as quickly as possible, using the force that was necessary and no more than was necessary.” But even as he highlighted the military necessity of the attacks, Nixon also defended unlimited war, arguing that “no future American President should ever send Americans into battle with one hand tied behind their backs.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention, New Orleans, Louisiana,” August 20, 1973, APP.

⁶⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “Statement About the Vietnam Veteran,” March 24, 1973, APP. See also Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks to a Joint Session of the South Carolina General Assembly,” February 20, 1973, APP.

⁶¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention, New Orleans, Louisiana,” August 20, 1973, APP.

Thus, despite the political, diplomatic, military, and moral agonies of the war, peace with honor also meant Americans had died with honor and that the Vietnam War was worth the cost. One month after his inauguration, the President spoke to the South Carolina General Assembly in Columbia and talked about what the recent peace settlement meant to America, to South Vietnam, and to the world. “What does peace with honor mean?” he asked, “Was the sacrifice worth it?” Nixon knew, of course, that historians would question whether the purpose was worth the price but, rather than offering a resounding “Yes!” Nixon said perhaps “Only historians in the future” would be able to assess those costs and sacrifices accurately. Nevertheless, he asked future scholars to consider the alternatives. When he first became president, some Republicans had encouraged Nixon just to “get out of Vietnam” – to bring the troops home and leave South Vietnam, whatever the consequences. In 1969, that would have been politically easy, but if the U.S. had negotiated the release of its prisoners of war and taken its troops out of Vietnam, the war still would have been long and costly, *and* it would have had no purpose. To explain his point, the President read from a letter he had received from a California woman whose son had been killed in the war. “As a mother of a young man who gave his life in this war, I felt very strongly about wanting an honorable peace agreement,” Nixon quoted. If the U.S. had negotiated a peace settlement for anything less, it would have let down and dishonored both the living and the dead. The deaths of Americans were tragic enough, the woman had written, but to die in vain would have been an even greater tragedy.⁶² Peace with honor had made American sacrifices purposeful and valuable, Nixon asserted, and had allowed Americans to fight and die with honor.

The U.S. had further secured an honorable and moral peace because it had contained communist aggression and preserved a free and independent Southeast Asia. On February 26, 1974,

⁶² Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks to a Joint Session of the South Carolina General Assembly,” February 20, 1973, APP.

thirteen months after the peace agreement, Nixon spoke in the Cabinet Room at the White House to members of Congress, the VA administrator, and representatives of veterans' organizations. Once again, Nixon praised peace with honor for ending the war the right way – “in a way that America remained respected throughout the world” – which proved that the U.S. still had the strength and will to accomplish its international goals. If the U.S. had not ended the war the right way, South Vietnam and Cambodia would be under communist control and the rest of Southeast Asia would be threatened by communist aggression. Some Americans had criticized this Domino Theory, but Nixon insisted that people in Southeast Asia were watching the U.S. to see how it would respond to communist expansion. If they determined that the U.S. was not a reliable ally or that the United States would be “pushed over” by the communists, they would lose confidence in the U.S. and resign themselves to communist domination. But because the United States held the line against aggression in South Vietnam, 250 million people in Southeast Asia had a chance to determine their own destiny in the world. For Nixon, peace with honor thus demonstrated that the U.S. did not lack the will to meet international challenges. When great powers “show a lack of will” they lost respect all over the world and opened the door for aggression in other places.⁶³ By fighting for peace with honor, the U.S. had halted communist advances in Southeast Asia and preempted communist aggression throughout the world. Peace with honor amounted to another victory for the United States in the Cold War.

Finally, the President insisted that winning peace with honor also gave the United States the chance to win lasting world peace. Even before he proclaimed the final peace agreement, Nixon announced in his second inaugural address on January 20, 1973, that the United States stood “on the threshold of a new era of peace in the world.”⁶⁴ At a press conference at the White House on

⁶³ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks on Signing a Proclamation Honoring Vietnam Veterans,” February 26, 1974, APP.

⁶⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Oath of Office and Second Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1973, APP.

January 31, he further explained that if the peace agreement was kept, “we will have peace in not only Vietnam but in Indochina for a very long period of time” if everyone had the will and incentives for peace.⁶⁵ Peace with honor meant “the chances for lasting peace in the world are greater today than at any time in our past,” he added on March 24.⁶⁶ Six days later, Nixon spoke from the State Dining Room at the White House in front of 140 State legislators from the Intergovernmental Relations Committee of the National Legislative Conference. He praised peace with honor and claimed again that the last year had witnessed perhaps “the greatest progress in reducing tensions in the world and working toward a world of peace that we have had since the end of World War II.”⁶⁷

No More Vietnams

World peace would not automatically follow peace with honor though, and Nixon exhorted the country to maintain its military and moral strength – both its capacity and its will – to uphold the international edifice of peace. If the U.S. wanted more than a “flimsy” peace or an “interlude between wars,” it would have to remain strong.⁶⁸ In his last nationwide address on Vietnam in March 1973, the President pleaded that the U.S. not cut its defense budget or unilaterally reduce its forces because that would increase the risk of war.⁶⁹ The U.S. could not unilaterally disarm any more than it could unilaterally withdraw from Vietnam. No one else could defend the free world so if the U.S. ever became even just “the second strongest nation in the world” the edifice of world peace might collapse and “free nations everywhere would [live] in mortal danger.”⁷⁰ The U.S. could also

⁶⁵ Richard M. Nixon, “The President’s News Conference,” January 31, 1973, APP.

⁶⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Statement About the Vietnam Veteran,” March 24, 1973, APP.

⁶⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks to State Legislators Attending the National Legislative Conference,” March 30, 1973, APP.

⁶⁸ Richard M. Nixon, “Oath of Office and Second Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1973, APP.

⁶⁹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation About Vietnam and Domestic Problems,” March 29, 1973, APP.

⁷⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention, New Orleans, Louisiana,” August 20, 1973; “Address to the Nation About Vietnam and Domestic Problems,” March 29, 1973, APP. See also,

only negotiate with other superpowers from a position of strength. The “one unbreakable rule of international diplomacy,” he explained, was “You can’t get something in a negotiation unless you have something to give.”⁷¹ He likewise told state legislators at the National Legislative Conference in March 1973 that “The day you send the President of the United States into the ring with a leader of any powerful country as the leader of the second strongest nation in the world, then you are in deep trouble.” American power was also essential to international respect. He told the legislators, “When I leave this office, I want to leave it with respect for the President of the United States, whoever he is, for the Office of the Presidency, and respect for the strength of the United States undiminished, because it is that strength that is the world’s best guardian of peace and freedom.”⁷² Less than seventeen months later, of course, Nixon would withdraw from the presidency with dishonor.

To enjoy world peace the United States also had to remain morally strong. As America’s longest war finally came to a close, Nixon knew that Americans would want to “throw up [their] hands, turn inward, and withdraw from [their] obligations in the world” but his administration was determined not to retreat into isolation as the U.S. had after World War I.⁷³ Lacking the will to fight was just as dangerous as lacking the capacity to fight. Whether the U.S. decided to “cop out” or “cut back,” the effect was the same.⁷⁴ Nixon therefore urged Americans not to cast away their confidence in their country. In his second inaugural address, he reminded Americans that the United States remained the exceptional nation in the world because of its “unparalleled” record for responsibility, generosity, creativity, and progress. The American system had “produced and provided more

Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks to State Legislators Attending the National Legislative Conference,” March 30, 1973, APP.

⁷¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation About Vietnam and Domestic Problems,” March 29, 1973, APP.

⁷² Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks to State Legislators Attending the National Legislative Conference,” March 30, 1973, APP.

⁷³ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks About United States Relations With Europe,” February 15, 1973; “Oath of Office and Second Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1973, APP.

⁷⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention, New Orleans, Louisiana,” August 20, 1973, APP.

freedom and more abundance, more widely shared, than any system in the history of the world,” he declared, and peace with honor in Vietnam could lead to world peace for future generations.⁷⁵ Two months later, however, he warned that nations historically “fell by the wayside at the height of their strength and wealth because their people became weak, soft, and self-indulgent and lost the character and the spirit which had led to their greatness.” But if Americans could guard against national complacency and decadence by renewing their faith in God, their country, and its leaders, they could win the peace and their descendants would one day see this moment as “America’s finest hour.”⁷⁶

Even as Nixon called for renewed national strength and praised America’s steadfastness and will to achieve peace with honor, he underscored a new, limited role for the United States when the Vietnam War ended. Although the U.S. had made exceptional progress towards peace in the last year, Nixon announced in his second inaugural address that Americans needed to understand “the necessity and the limitations of America’s role in maintaining that peace.” The U.S. had to continue to preserve peace and freedom around the globe, and still hoped to limit nuclear arms and the confrontations between great powers, but the United States would step down from its starring role on the world stage. The U.S. could no longer “make every other nation’s conflict our own, or make every other nation’s future our responsibility, or presume to tell the people of other nations how to manage their own affairs.” Just as the U.S. respected “the right of each nation to determine its own future,” it also recognized that each nation had the responsibility “to secure its own future.” America’s role in preserving world peace was indispensable, but so was each nation “in preserving its own peace.” This shift away from international intervention was not “a retreat from our responsibilities,” Nixon claimed, “but a better way to peace.” For too long, the United States had

⁷⁵ Richard M. Nixon, “Oath of Office and Second Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1973, APP.

⁷⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation About Vietnam and Domestic Problems,” March 29, 1973, APP.

gathered “all power and responsibility in Washington” and the President said it was time now to “turn away from the condescending policies of paternalism – of ‘Washington knows best.’” Moving forward, the United States would encourage other individuals and nations to take more responsibility for themselves and “measure what we will do for others by what they will do for themselves.”⁷⁷ Thus, in spite of all the good that Nixon attributed to peace with honor, he began to apply Vietnamization to the rest of the world. Under the Nixon Doctrine, the U.S. would continue to supply economic and military aid to help free countries defend themselves, but it would no longer send American soldiers. The morality and value of peace with honor notwithstanding, Nixon and the United States vowed there would be “no more Vietnams.”⁷⁸

Thus, although the Nixon administration extolled the Paris Peace Accords for accomplishing peace with honor, the agreement merely disguised America’s determination to have peace at any price. For starters, the peace was not acceptable to South Vietnam whose representatives were not even included in the secret diplomacy between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. The settlement did preserve President Thieu and the GVN but permitted North Vietnamese soldiers to remain in South Vietnam which both affronted and threatened Saigon. The United States had previously demanded that all foreign soldiers be removed from South Vietnam, but it made this concession in order to reach peace – but at South Vietnam’s expense. In effect, Saigon had to make the concessions and sacrifices, more than Washington. All sides also presumed that the peace agreement was temporary. U.S. strategists and their South Vietnamese counterparts did not expect North Vietnam to honor the agreement and South Vietnam felt betrayed knowing that the Americans had forced their way out of Vietnam when they expected violence to break out again. To that extent, the peace agreement allowed the United States to establish a “decent interval” – a morally acceptable period between the

⁷⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “Oath of Office and Second Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1973, APP.

⁷⁸ Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985).

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signing of the peace accords and the time when North Vietnam would begin hostilities again. By the time the Vietnam War restarted, U.S. officials could wash their hands of Indochina and claim that peace had not collapsed on their watch and, therefore, that they were not morally obligated to come to South Vietnam's aid. By concluding a peace settlement that was hardly honorable and not even, effectively, peace, the United States had agreed to peace at any price.

Conclusion

Between 1943 and 1973, the United States reversed the attitudes, values, and ethics that had justified victory at all costs in World War II and settled for peace at any price in the Vietnam War. Unconditional surrender turned into peace with honor, total victory became total withdrawal, unlimited war evolved into limited war, and peace through victory changed into victory through peace. U.S. foreign policy and grand strategy changed between World War II and Vietnam because of political constraints, military realities, diplomatic doctrines, and economic fluctuations, but the revolution from victory at all costs to peace at any price was also a moral shift with moral causes. The United States completed this strategic and moral volte-face as American presidents, advisers, strategists, commentators, and the larger public came to believe that victory was immoral and impossible. Over the course of thirty years, the United States devalued victory through a process of debellicization and became less tolerant of the human costs of war through moral inflation. After the Vietnam War, debellicization and moral inflation were locked into American foreign policy, law, and military doctrine through the Vietnam Syndrome, the War Powers Resolution, and the Powell Doctrine – all of which continue to constrain U.S. foreign policy and grand strategy today.

VIETNAM SYNDROME

Because Americans came to believe that victory was immoral and impossible, they became less willing to accept the costs of war and created a new paradigm in U.S. foreign policy, known as the Vietnam Syndrome. Since the end of the Vietnam War, the Vietnam Syndrome has acquired more enduring public and political meanings and typically signifies “The belief that foreign intervention is unwinnable and therefore a quagmire to be avoided; the inability to make and follow

through with overseas commitments.”¹ At bottom, this foreign policy condition connotes the unwillingness to deploy U.S. troops in foreign policy.

The malaise was most evident in South Vietnam where, no matter how dire the political and military situation became, the United States refused to become involved again. After U.S. forces withdrew from Vietnam in 1973, President Thieu faced internal opposition while his administration remained totally dependent on American aid and ARVN began to fall apart. Despite his promises to help, however, Nixon was drowning in Watergate and, fighting for his own political life, could not come to South Vietnam’s aid. In August 1974, the President resigned in disgrace and, in October, Hanoi approved a major offensive to overthrow the Thieu regime and test Washington’s response. After overrunning Southern provinces, Hanoi determined that the U.S. would not intervene and launched a second offensive in March 1975. North Vietnamese forces soon threatened to cut South Vietnam in half and, after ARVN’s retreat turned into a rout, the South collapsed. The U.S. allowed some humanitarian efforts and began evacuating officials and collaborators out of Saigon but otherwise refused to help as the capital succumbed to chaos. Thieu resigned on April 21 and American helicopters extricated embassy officials and civilians in iconic desperate scenes before North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon on April 30 and unified Vietnam under a communist regime.

Nixon later admitted that the 1973 peace settlement was “not the most satisfactory solution,” but the United States refused to intervene and save South Vietnam in 1975 because the war had made Americans profoundly distrustful of government and authority in general and of foreign military interventions in particular.² The historian George C. Herring writes that “the central

¹ Safire, *Safire’s Political Dictionary*, 779; George C. Herring, “The Vietnam Syndrome,” in David L. Anderson, ed., *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 409.

² “A Nation Coming Into Its Own: What the President Saw,” *Time* 126, no. 4 (March 29, 1985): 53.

and essential element of the Vietnam Syndrome was a deep and abiding anxiety about military intervention abroad.”³ Americans had more or less willingly accepted foreign commitments and interventions and their costs since World War II and Herring explains that “U.S. involvement in Vietnam was a logical, if not inevitable, outgrowth of a world view and a policy – the policy of containment – that Americans in and out of government accepted without serious question for more than two decades.”⁴ By the time the last U.S. soldiers left Vietnam, however, the Vietnam War had killed the Cold War consensus in American foreign policy. The moral and strategic assumptions behind containment, domino theory, presidential doctrines, interventions, and anti-communism were replaced by beliefs that victory was immoral and impossible which made Americans hesitant about using forces and uncertain about the United States’ role in the world. The worst fears of American leaders were also discredited after the fall of Saigon. The dominoes the United States had been propping up in Southeast Asia never tumbled over and the U.S. position in the region was never really damaged.⁵

The war in Vietnam further revealed the limits of American power and ethics. The United States’ immoral and impossible policies had exposed the excesses of U.S. institutions and brought the costs of the Cold War home, and critics saw the war as a tragic commentary on American arrogance and ignorance. Evidently, the United States had overextended its commitments as government leaders had exaggerated American power, haughtily believing that the U.S. could enforce its will wherever and whenever it wanted. Vietnam thus left such an acrid aftertaste that many Americans opposed U.S. interventions around the globe, even for the sake of supporting old

³ Herring, “The Vietnam Syndrome,” 411.

⁴ Herring, *America’s Longest War*, xiii.

⁵ Charles E. Neu, ed., *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 4, 6, 21.

and major allies. At public, congressional, and administrative levels, the Vietnam Syndrome constrained U.S. government officials from exercising American power abroad.⁶

After Vietnam, therefore, Americans were not only reluctant to pursue victory in war, they hesitated to become involved at all. By applying the lessons of the Vietnam War to future foreign policy decisions, the Vietnam Syndrome deterred the United States from becoming too involved in crises around the globe and it continues to dictate policymaking in the Twenty-First Century. Ever since the war ended, Americans have feared that every international conflict could become another Vietnam – from Libya and Nicaragua in the 1980s, to Kuwait and Yugoslavia in the 1990s, to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria since 9/11.

War Powers Resolution

The United States was also less willing to pursue victory and accept its costs after Vietnam because the government was held back from doing so by national law. Ever since Congress declared war on Japan in December 1941, the Legislative Branch had largely been sidelined in foreign policy making and, during the 1970s, Congress tried to take the power back and challenged the imperial presidency. Generally, Congress questioned the president's dominance of foreign affairs and demanded more equality and teamwork in policymaking, but it also hired its own experts on national security issues, prohibited all American activities in Indochina and, in November 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution over President Nixon's veto. The Resolution required the President to inform Congress within forty-eight hours of any U.S. military deployment and effectively reasserted Congressional authority to declare war and influence foreign policy.

Congress also established special oversight and investigative committees to monitor and review U.S. foreign policies and programs. A Senate investigation in 1971, for example, discovered

⁶ Herring, "The Vietnam Syndrome," 411; Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows*, 67.

discrepancies in the Johnson administration's accounts of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and led to the repeal of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in an attempt to restrict Nixon's control over the Vietnam war. In January 1975, Congress appointed special committees led by Representative Otis Pike (D-NY) and Senator Frank Church (D-ID) to look into U.S. intelligence activities because of suspicions Vietnam had raised about the CIA. The Pike and Church Committees gained access to CIA files and exposed the dark underbelly of government policies. The investigations also subjected executive agencies to congressional oversight and required the CIA to justify its budget and activities. These Congressional committees and investigations, including the Watergate Committee, discovered that many executive programs and personnel were running politically, financially, and morally amok and Congress reasserted its authority, in part, to correct and constrain U.S. foreign policies and to preclude war and avoid paying its costs.

The Powell Doctrine

Military doctrines after Vietnam also reflected the unwillingness to intervene in foreign conflicts and the intolerance for the human costs of war. Just as strategists had tried to find less costly ways to win after the attrition of the American Civil War and World War I, and after Hiroshima in World War II, so they tried after Vietnam to minimize the price of American objectives. As the historian Russell Weigley wrote, "The political liabilities of [a] prolonged exchange of casualties... and beyond that, of course, the simple hideousness of this new face of war – inevitably prompted a search for less terrible roads to victory, for strategies less calculated to leave the victor almost as battered and bleeding as the vanquished."⁷

Military officials bitterly resented administrative ignorance and public opposition during the Vietnam War, but they were not immune to the effects of the syndrome. In fact, Herring maintains

⁷ Russell F. Weigley, "American Strategy from Its Beginnings through the First World War" in Paret, Craig, and Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 434.

that “Nowhere in American society was there a greater reluctance to employ force than in the military itself.”⁸ After the war, the U.S. military hesitated to commit troops to projects that could turn into another Vietnam, especially wars that might become long, costly, inconclusive, ambiguous, or that lacked public support. Military officials accused the home front of ingratitude and objected to civilian leadership and oversight since they believed that errors in civilian judgment had deprived soldiers of the tools they needed to win, but the military also opposed putting boots on the ground for undefined missions like peacekeeping.

To avoid another Vietnam, therefore, the U.S. military codified a set of guidelines drafted by Army Colonel Colin Powell in 1984 that reflected the military’s anxieties about foreign interventions. In a speech to the National Press Club in November 1984, Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger outlined what became known as the “Powell Doctrine” – the preconditions for using American soldiers so as to achieve U.S. objectives at minimal costs. The doctrine stipulated that troops should only be used as a last resort and in defense of defined national interests. Military objectives also needed to be clear and attainable and must have public support. Once U.S. soldiers had been committed to the field, however, the military should be authorized to use overwhelming force to ensure a decisive victory. Critics denounced the new rules of American warfare, and the doctrine was never officially endorsed, but many commanders operated by them and, after Colin Powell joined the Joint Chiefs of Staff, they were applied to the Persian Gulf War.⁹

Debellicization and moral inflation thus changed American military values, attitudes, ethics, and doctrines. Learning the lessons of Vietnam, the military demanded short wars, minimum losses, and clear, attainable objectives with reliable, overwhelming public support, and blank-checks from

⁸ George C. Herring, “The Vietnam Syndrome” in Anderson, *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, 415.

⁹ Herring, “The Vietnam Syndrome” in Anderson, 415; Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 68, 73.

the government to fight without restrictions and with maximum lethal force. The military also insisted on an exit strategy – a plan for concluding hostilities and ending the war. Essentially, the military refused to fight unpopular wars with the possibility of losing. They wanted guaranteed success, war without risk, war without cost.

As the historian Arnold Isaacs has shown, however, the acceptable costs of war remain indeterminate. How long can a war last? How many casualties will the military or the public accept? And how can leaders obtain or guarantee public support in advance?¹⁰ Of course, war without cost or moral fog sounds incongruous, like the presumption of a super- or hyperpower that possesses the political, military, industrial, and technological luxuries to do whatever it wants, whenever, and wherever it wants. More importantly, the reversal in American moral-strategic thinking asks what, if anything, will American citizens be willing to kill and die for, and how does that willingness change the international role of the United States?¹¹ Half a century after the United States evacuated its embassy in Saigon, Americans remain allergic to military commitments and war. Although they seem willing to send U.S. troops beyond our borders, Americans want to be certain that national interests are at stake, they want to be properly prepared, and they demand that the United States fight wars according to American values lest the country once again march down the path of folly.¹²

HAWKS AND DOVES

The decline of total war, the development of a nuclear taboo, and a greater humanitarian concern for American and enemy lives suggest that the thirty-year reversal in U.S. foreign policy marked a shift towards higher ethics. A decline from victory to stalemate and then defeat and the

¹⁰ Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows*, 72.

¹¹ Nue, "Vietnam and the Transformation of America," 23.

¹² Barbara Wertheim Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985); Anderson, *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, 425–26.

loss of America's will to win indicate a trend of weakness and decadence. But this dissertation is not a story of progress or declension.¹³ Rather, it is a study about ends and means in U.S. foreign policy and the relationship between victory and its costs.

My dissertation thus challenges both foreign policy hawks, who argue that the United States' willingness to pay the price of victory did not go far enough, and doves, who contend that America's will went too far. I challenge the former by suggesting that victory in Korea and Vietnam was not worth the cost and that the loss of political will through debellicization and demoralization also created more humane considerations for civilian casualties, collateral damage, human rights, and world peace. I challenge the latter by suggesting that militarization and ruthlessness led to total victory in World War II which ultimately was worth killing and dying for.

Hawks argue that the United States suffered a moral decline or deterioration after World War II and they decry the process of declension, debellicization, and demoralization that caused the U.S. to lose its valuation of victory and tolerance for the human costs of war. They praise Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, George Marshall, and the other architects of victory for triumphantly winning World War II, but criticize Truman and Dean Acheson for substituting containment for victory in Korea and limiting America's war effort which led to a stalemate. Most of all, they denounce America's humiliating defeat and abject withdrawal from Vietnam. Vietnam revisionists, in particular, continue to insist, despite all contrary evidence, that the United States could have won in Vietnam if not for spineless leaders like Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, defective military strategies, and waning domestic support. Hawks' declension narratives, in short, focus on outcomes: victory in World War II, stalemate in Korea, and defeat in Vietnam; and they blame the decline of victories on bleeding-heart doves and the decline of American resolve.

¹³ Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo*, 25.

Hawks are right that U.S. strategists lost the willingness to kill and die in pursuit of victory after World War II, but by focusing exclusively on outcomes, they mistakenly presume that victory is the supreme good in American foreign policy and that nothing else matters beyond winning and losing. Most importantly, hawks are wrong in suggesting that debellicization or demoralization in the United States was always bad. The loss of American will grew from a more ethical and humanitarian consciousness for civilians, collateral damage, human rights, and world peace.¹⁴ Some goals and ends also simply are not worth the cost. In Vietnam, for example, George Herring judiciously concluded that the war was morally unwinnable. Perhaps the United States could have won the Vietnam War if presidents from Truman to Nixon would have been willing to un-limit the war by expanding the conflict beyond Southeast Asia and by escalating American means to include nuclear weapons and the full power of the U.S. military. But Herring rightly determines that the cost of such a war would have been too high, and Americans can be grateful that the United States was not willing to pay that price in Vietnam.

In parallel, doves argue that the United States suffered from militarization during and after World War II, and they revile the military-industrial complex for making the U.S. a force for evil in the world. They denounce all American wars as “bad” and condemn American warmongers for their racism and annihilation strategies, especially U.S. strategic bombing campaigns, nuclear brinkmanship, and search and destroy missions. In short, doves focus on costs: civilian deaths, atrocities, and collateral damage; and they blame the tragedies of American warfare on Strangelove hawks whose misguided will went too far.¹⁵

¹⁴ Michael Mandelbaum, *The Ideas That Conquered The World: Peace, Democracy, And Free Markets In The Twenty-First Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004); Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

¹⁵ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009 [1959]).

Doves are right about the expansion of American militarization and the tragedies that the United States has perpetrated around the world since 1945. But by focusing exclusively on costs they mistakenly presume that peace is the supreme good in American foreign policy and that nothing else matters beyond war's casualties. Most importantly, doves are wrong in suggesting that militarization was always bad since it enabled the United States to win World War II. Some causes, after all, are worth killing and dying for. In his history of the Cold War, for example, John Lewis Gaddis optimistically determined that the world was a "better place" because the United States and its allies won the war. He concluded: "For all its dangers, atrocities, costs, distractions, and moral compromises, the Cold War – like the American Civil War – was a necessary contest that settled fundamental issues once and for all. We have no reason to miss it. But given the alternatives, we have little reason either to regret its having occurred."¹⁶ Perhaps the United States did not need to use the atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to defeat Japan but, insofar as victory led to greater "goods" for the United States and the world, Americans can be grateful that the U.S. was willing to pay the price of victory in World War II.

Victory and Death

The historian Michael Sherry observed that Americans like to celebrate the spoils of war but rarely acknowledge its costs.¹⁷ But victory and casualties go together. Strategists cannot separate ends from means or outcomes from prices – what they want from how they get it. War is obscene and the United States cannot have it both ways. Americans cannot demand total victory *and* low costs. The U.S. cannot achieve total victory in a limited war, nor can it minimize casualties and maximize political objectives. War is the great devourer; it needs constant restraints and evaluations. As the

¹⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), xi.

¹⁷ Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 1.

political theorist Michael Walzer wrote, “The restraint of war is the beginning of peace.”¹⁸ War is costly, dirty, bloody business that challenges morality in both victory and defeat, and neither nations nor individuals can participate without paying its price.

In their understandable demands for victory and peace – for right outcomes and right prices – hawks and doves have discounted the “good” that has come from “evil.” By criticizing America’s defeat and withdrawal in Vietnam, hawks have overlooked the “good” inherent in American restraint. While revisionists may rightly disparage America’s humiliating exit from Vietnam, they often neglect the immoral costs that dominant victory would have required. Should the United States have invaded North Vietnam, accepted war with China, or launched nuclear strikes? What would total victory, unlimited war, or World War III have cost? However frustrating and degrading, limited war developed not only from a lack of will, but from a humanitarian concern for American and enemy lives, human rights, and world peace. At the same time, while many of the war’s immoral costs are worth condemning, Americans cannot critique or praise U.S. restraints in Vietnam without acknowledging the wretched results that limited war caused. After all, the United States lost the war, in part, because U.S. strategists were not willing to un-limit the war effort and exact and endure the price of victory.

By criticizing American annihilation strategies in World War II, doves have likewise overlooked the “good” of American victory. While critics may rightly reprove the destruction of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, they often miss the moral outcomes that immoral policies achieved. How could the Holocaust be stopped, how could the Third Reich be destroyed, how could Germany and Japan be defeated, demilitarized, and democratized, without the terrible price that the Allies exacted and endured in World War II? However brutal and depraved,

¹⁸ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 335.

unlimited war resulted not only from racism and mercilessness, but from a zealous, single-minded devotion to victory. At the same time, while many of the war's outcomes are worth celebrating, Americans cannot commemorate the "good" without accounting for the evils that made victory possible. After all, the United States and its allies won World War II, in part, because they were willing to be just as ruthless and fanatical as their enemies and were willing to kill and die on an unprecedented scale.

Assuredly, the lesson from World War II is that some ideas, outcomes, or futures are worth killing and dying for, while the lesson from the Korean and Vietnam Wars is that some victories are not worth the cost. It would be wrong, therefore, to conclude that the ends always justify the means, but it would be equally wrong to presume that some means always preclude the ends.

DOING GOOD AND EVIL

What is the answer to McNamara's Dilemma? "How much evil must we do in order to do good?" The military strategist Edward Luttwak has stressed the importance of victory in war. He contends that the United States has become "comfortably habituated to defeat" and that, in the struggle to abolish war, the "right-thinking" have made victory impossible and immoral. They argue that nuclear weapons and guerrilla warfare would result in annihilation rather than victory and, since victory can have no meaning, war can have no rational purpose. Luttwak argues, however, that victory is still possible and desirable. He concluded, "There is no doubt, to be sure, that victory always has its price, and that it may be very high. Victory is often a terrible thing for the victors. Only defeat is worse still: while it may contain some well-hidden advantage, it usually brings not only

material loss but also demoralization in its wake.” Debellicization may lead to peace but, taken to its logical extreme, it rejects resistance to aggression in favor of appeasement, retreat, or impotence.¹⁹

On the other hand, the diplomat George F. Kennan has emphasized the significance of war’s human costs and the limits of unlimited war and unconditional surrender. In a series of lectures at the University of Chicago in 1951, Kennan reflected on the United States’ “amazing ability to shift gears overnight” in its ideological or moral attitudes and denounced Americans’ love of victory: “Day before yesterday, let us say, the issues at stake between ourselves and another power were not worth the life of a single American boy. Today, nothing else counts at all; our cause is holy; the cost is no consideration; violence must know no limitations short of unconditional surrender.”²⁰ Just six years after the end of World War II, Kennan accused Americans of failing “to appreciate the limitations of war in general – any war – as a vehicle for the achievement of the objectives of the democratic state.” Indeed, he rejected the idea that the United States could directly accomplish any good by doing evil in war.

It is essential to recognize that the maiming and killing of men and the destruction of human shelters and other installations, however necessary it may be for other reasons, cannot in itself make a positive contribution to any democratic purpose. It can be the regrettable alternative to similar destruction in our own country or the killing of our own people. It can conceivably protect values which it is necessary to protect and which can be protected in no other way. Occasionally, if used with forethought and circumspection and restraint, it may trade the lesser violence for the greater and impel the stream of human events into channels which will be more hopeful ones than it would otherwise have taken. But, basically, the democratic purpose does not prosper when a man dies or a building collapses or an enemy force retreats. It may be hard for it to prosper *unless* these things happen, and in that lies the entire justification for the use of force at all as a weapon of national policy. But the actual prospering occurs only when something happens in a man’s mind that increases his enlightenment and the consciousness of his real relation to other people – something that makes him aware that, whenever the dignity of another man is offended, his own dignity, as a man among men, is thereby reduced.²¹

¹⁹ Edward Luttwak, *On the Meaning of Victory: Essays on Strategy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 292–93.

²⁰ George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 60th-anniversary expanded ed. (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 69–70.

²¹ Kennan, 94–95.

Kennan thus pled for realism and restraint over ideological nationalism or moral idealism and condemned both “the sweeping moral rejection of international violence which bedevils so many Americans in times of peace [and] the helpless abandonment to its compulsions and its inner momentum which characterizes so many of us in times of war.”²²

Politically and morally, Kennan also asked whether victory was an illusion. In the nuclear age, total victory simply meant total annihilation which meant victory was impossible. “There might be a great weakening of the armed forces of one side or another,” he explained, “but I think it out of the question that there should be such a thing as a general and formal submission of the national will on either side.” Regime change through demilitarization and democratization were not just strategic conceits, therefore, but Faustian bargains. Indeed, Kennan asserted, “I think there is no more dangerous delusion, none that has done us a greater disservice in the past or that threatens to do us a greater disservice in the future, than the concept of total victory.”²³

As U.S. strategists continue to wrestle with the recurring moral dilemmas in U.S. foreign policy, they would thus do well to follow Dean Rusk’s advice from 1967 and “weigh military advantage against military losses” – to balance military benefits against their costs.²⁴ Future policies may be advanced or restrained by America’s willingness to exact and endure casualties, but to know how much evil may be justified in order to do good requires leaders, commentators, and citizens to consider which values matter most and question the moral supremacy of victory. The political statesmanship and moral wisdom to know the difference between victories that are worth the cost and those that are not requires humility, humanity, and history.

²² Kennan, 93–95.

²³ Kennan, 108–9.

²⁴ Memo, Dean Rusk to the President, 20 November 1967, #14, “McNamara, Robert S. – SEA,” Box 3, FWWR, NSF, LBJPL.

Sources

Abbreviations Used in Sources

ABC	Atomic Bomb Collection
APP	American Presidency Project
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMH	Center of Military History, US Army
DNSA	Digital National Security Archive
DOD	US Department of Defense
DOS	US Department of State
EBB	Electronic Briefing Book
FDRPL	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library
FGC	Files of Gordon Chase
FWWR	Files of Walt W. Rostow
FO	Foreign Affairs
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FPMP	Francis P. Matthews Papers
<i>FRUS</i>	<i>Foreign Relations of the United States</i>
GCMF	The George C. Marshall Foundation
GMEP	George M. Elsey Papers
HSTP	Harry S. Truman Papers
HSTPL	Harry S. Truman Presidential Library
JAR	Japan Air Raids
KWF	Korean War File
LBJPL	Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library
LOC	Library of Congress
MemCon	Memorandum of Conversation
MSF	Master Speech File
NAF	Naval Aide Files
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration
NSA	National Security Advisor
NSC	National Security Council
NSF	National Security Files
<i>NYT</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>
PSF	President's Secretary's Files
SMOF	Staff Member & Office Files
SOSF	Secretary of State File
VCF	Vietnam Country File
WHCF	White House Central Files
<i>WP</i>	<i>Washington Post</i>

ARCHIVE COLLECTIONS

Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, Independence, Missouri

Atomic Bomb Collection
Dean G. Acheson Papers
Francis P. Matthews Papers
George M. Elsey Papers
Harry S. Truman Papers
 Korean War File, 1947-52
 Naval Aide to the President Files, 1945-53
 President's Secretary's Files
 Psychological Strategy Board Files, 1951-53
John B. Moullette Papers
World War II Collection

Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas

Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson
 National Security Files
 Country File, Vietnam
 Files of McGeorge Bundy
 Files of Gordon Chase
 Files of Walt W. Rostow
 Files of Bromley K. Smith
 National Security Council Histories File
 Speech File
 Subject File
 Office Files of the White House Aides
 Office Files of Charles Maguire
 Office Files of Marry McPherson
 Office Files of Bill Moyers
 Office Files of Matthew Nimetz
 Office Files of Frederick Panzer
 Office of the President File
 White House Central Files
 Confidential Files
 Subject Files
Papers of Bromley K. Smith
Papers of Clark Clifford
 Vietnam Files
Papers of George W. Ball
Papers of McGeorge Bundy
Papers of Paul C. Warnke
 John McNaughton Files

Andrew O. Pace

Paul C. Warnke Files

DIGITAL COLLECTIONS

American Presidency Project

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

The Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale University

<https://avalon.law.yale.edu/>

Central Intelligence Agency, Freedom of Information Act Reading Room

<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/>

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library

<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/collections/franklin/>

Franklin D. Roosevelt Day by Day

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Master Speech File, 1898-1945

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George C. Marshall Foundation

<https://www.marshallfoundation.org/>

The George C. Marshall Papers

Harry S. Truman Presidential Library

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The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

The Korean War and Its Origins

Japan Air Raids

<https://www.japanairraids.org/>

League of Nations Treaty Series

<https://treaties.un.org/pages/LONOnline.aspx>

Milestone Documents, National Archives

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/list>

National Security Archive

<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/>

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