

A postwar myth: 500,000 U.S. lives saved

The idea that use of the atomic bombs against Japan saved half a million American lives persists as the main justification for that use. But military planners during and immediately after the war employed much lower figures.

by Barton J. Bernstein

*"I wanted to save a half million boys on our side. . . . I never lost any sleep over my decision."*¹

—Harry S. Truman, 1959

MORE THAN FOUR decades after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many question whether these bombings were necessary, why the two terrible weapons were used, and whether opportunities were missed to end the war without them. Such questioners tend to regard with skepticism President Truman's postwar claims, now embedded in popular lore, that the atomic bombs saved a half million American lives.²

Actually, there is no evidence that any top military planner or major American policy maker ever believed that an invasion would cost that many lives. Indeed, there is solid evidence, in declassified files in Washington, that military planners before Hiroshima had placed the number at 46,000 and sometimes as low as about 20,000 American lives.

The claim of a half million American lives was a postwar creation. Shortly after the Nagasaki bombing, Winston Churchill declared that the atomic bombings had saved well over 1,200,000 Allied lives, including about a million American lives. General Leslie Groves, commanding general of the wartime atomic bomb project who was proud of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, suggested that Churchill's number was "a little high" and seemed to wish for an estimate of slightly under a million.³ During Truman's years in the White House, the president usually placed the number at about a quarter of a million lives, and occasionally at only 200,000.⁴

But after leaving the White House, he began raising this number. His memoir writers stated in their first draft, "half

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a million [U.S. and Allied] casualties with at least 300,000 dead." But by the time Truman's book came out in 1955, they had increased the number to "half a million American lives" saved and cited General George C. Marshall, wartime army chief of staff, as having given that estimate to Truman shortly before Hiroshima. That is the number that Truman used publicly in his postpresidential years, except on those rare occasions when he doubled it to a million.⁵

At first glance, such claims may seem plausible—especially to a generation that recalls the brutal war and to the next two generations of Americans who have often heard that their fathers, grandfathers, or uncles might well have died in the planned U.S. invasions of Japan.

World War II had been vicious; the island warfare in the Pacific seemed especially bloody. In five weeks in February and March 1945, on the tiny (eight square miles) island of Iwo Jima, where 80,000 American troops engaged in the battle, 6,281 died and another 19,000 were wounded when nearly the entire garrison of 21,000 Japanese fought to the death. Between March 1, 1944, and May 1, 1945, 13,742 Americans died in land war in the Pacific while killing about 310,000 Japanese. At Okinawa, in the bloodiest major battle of the Pacific, stretching from mid-April to mid-June and involving more than 170,000 U.S. troops, about 13,000 were killed, and almost 36,000 others wounded, while killing about 70,000 Japanese and probably 80,000 Okinawa residents.

Yet, none of these painful numbers—when carefully examined and extrapolated—support the claim that 500,000 Americans might have been killed in the invasion of Japan. In fact, in June 1945, while the Okinawa battle was winding down, U.S. military planners estimated that, at most, 46,000 might die in the various possible invasions of Japan.

On June 15, 1945, four weeks before the atomic bomb test at Alamogordo and seven weeks before Hiroshima was bombed, the Joint War Plans Committee (JWPC), a high-level advisory group to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, concluded

that about 40,000 Americans would die in the likely two-stage assault on Japan: southern Kyushu (operation “Olympic”) beginning on November 1, 1945, and, if necessary, the Tokyo plain (operation “Coronet”) starting on about March 1, 1946. The Kyushu campaign, the JWPC stressed, “may well prove to be the decisive operation which will terminate the war.” In that event, according to JWPC estimates, many fewer Americans would die, perhaps under 20,000.⁶

The JWPC acknowledged that it was impossible to make an “accurate estimate,” since experience with the Japanese varied widely, from the four-day battle in November 1943 at Tarawa, where 1,000 marines died and about 2,300 were wounded while killing 4,700 Japanese, to the “unopposed landing” at Lingayen Gulf in the Philippines in January 1945, where 175,000 American troops easily established themselves in what one historian later called a “walkover.” Despite this mixed pattern of the immediate past, the JWPC were reasonably comfortable in offering what they called an “educated guess.”

The JWPC’s June 15 educated guesses for three different invasion plans were:

- the most likely, an attack on southern Kyushu, followed by the Tokyo plain—about 40,000 Americans dead, 150,000 wounded, and 2,500 missing;
- the less likely attack on southern Kyushu, followed by northwestern Kyushu—25,000 Americans dead, 105,000 wounded, and 2,500 missing; and
- an attack on southern Kyushu, followed by northwestern Kyushu and then the Tokyo plain—46,000 dead, 170,000 wounded, and 4,000 missing in action.

Clearly, all these estimates fell far short—by at least 454,000—of later claims of 500,000 American lives. In fact, in early June 1945, when a layman suggested such a high number as a half million dead, army planners bluntly replied in a secret report: “[such an] estimated loss . . . is entirely too high.” Studying this planners’ report, General George C. Marshall, army chief of staff, agreed with their assessment and so informed Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson.⁷

It was not simply most top military men in Washington but also General Douglas MacArthur, U.S. commander in the Pacific, who believed that the casualties and deaths would not be as high as the rate at Normandy and Okinawa. MacArthur’s plans for the first stage, the November invasion of southern Kyushu, estimated total casualties (dead plus wounded) in the first three months at well under 100,000. When he discovered that some of his staff, in putting together “purely academic” estimates, had forecast possibly 110,000 casualties, he cabled Marshall on June 18, “I do not anticipate such a high rate of loss.”⁸

Later that day, at a White House meeting, Marshall informed President Truman “that the first 30 days in Kyushu should not exceed the price [of 31,000 casualties] we have paid in Luzon,” where 156,000 Japanese were killed or surrendered. Even the more pessimistic Admiral William Leahy, military aide to the president, exaggerating U.S. losses at

Okinawa, anticipated that the casualties at Kyushu would not be worse than the 35 percent he incorrectly ascribed to Okinawa. (Actually, the Okinawa rate was about 29 percent.) Leahy, using the wrong data, suggested that total casualties at Kyushu might run as high as 230,000.⁹

At this June 18 meeting, Marshall had not explained the "general conclusions" that his advisers had reached. "The highest casualty rate occurs during the assault phase of an amphibious operation." The first thirty days could be the worst. After that, as MacArthur's estimates also showed, the rate of U.S. wounded and killed would undoubtedly decline.

Three weeks after this White House meeting, on July 9, the Joint Staff Planners (JSP), another advisory group to the JCS, roughly reaffirmed Marshall's June 18 conclusions. Leahy's highest estimates were disregarded in that July 9 report.¹⁰

The JSP were also optimistic about the low level of U.S. casualties if the March 1 invasion of the Tokyo plain became necessary. According to this report, the Japanese would not be able to concentrate their forces at the plain, because of the "number and extent of beaches suitable for [the United States'] amphibious assault. . . . The terrain permits us to exploit our superiority in maneuver and in equipment." In summary, "this invasion of the Tokyo Plain should be relatively inexpensive."

When Truman approved the order of July 24 to use atomic bombs, he had never received a high-level report suggesting half a million or even a quarter million U.S. dead. All the estimates, especially those presented by Marshall, whom the president greatly trusted, were considerably lower in the months before Japan's surrender.

Of course, these were all pre-Hiroshima estimates. But soon after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, U.S. military leaders, writing in private and thus having no reason to distort estimates, agreed that any claim of 500,000 American lives saved was exorbitant. In September 1945, even though some U.S. military leaders feared that the Japanese were conducting "an intensive propaganda campaign concerning the bombing of their cities" to make the United States seem bloodthirsty, top generals in Washington argued that the invasions of Japan, if carried out, would have cost fewer than 200,000 American lives and maybe only "tens of thousands." Such were the postwar estimates of Lt. General John E. Hull, assistant chief of the Army's operations division, and of Lt. General Ira C. Eaker, deputy commander of the Air Force, and endorsed by General Henry ("Hap") Arnold, commander of the Air Force.¹¹

The myth of 500,000 American lives saved thus seems to have no basis in fact. No U.S. military planner in 1945, even after Hiroshima, would have put the number over 200,000, and many placed it much lower—near 40,000. The destruction of this myth does not resolve the pressing question of whether using the atomic bombs on Japan was morally justified or not. But at least recognizing that most pre-Hiroshima military estimates ranged between about

20,000 and 46,000 may help Americans understand the thinking of their leaders who, in 1945, welcomed the use of the bomb on Japanese cities in what was clearly a campaign of terror bombing.

Perhaps in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Truman developed a need to exaggerate the number of U.S. lives that the bombs might have saved by possibly helping render the invasions unnecessary. It is probably true, as he contended repeatedly, that he never lost any sleep over his decision. Believing ultimately in the myth of 500,000 lives saved may have been a way of concealing ambivalence, even from himself. The myth also helped deter Americans from asking troubling questions about the use of the atomic bombs. The destruction of this myth should reopen these questions. □

1. Quoted in Alfred Steinberg, *The Man from Missouri* (New York: Putnam, 1962), p. 259.

2. This article is a revised version of "The Myth of Lives Saved by A-Bombs," *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 1985, sec. 4, pp. 1, 2. Rufus Miles, "Hiroshima: The Strange Myth of Half a Million Lives Saved," *International Security* (Fall 1985), pp. 121–40 came to somewhat similar conclusions without using the relevant archival sources. Miles argues, substantially on the basis of inference, that Truman's military advisers believed before Hiroshima that the Kyushu invasion would cost only 7,000–8,000 U.S. lives; Miles concluded that the number would "probably [have been] less than 15,000 [and] almost surely . . . not more than 20,000." He seems to admit that an invasion of Honshu (which he was sure would not have been necessary) could have cost 50,000–250,000 U.S. lives, based on what he seems to believe Gen. Marshall told Truman before Hiroshima. Miles almost entirely disregarded archival sources, relied heavily on inference for his 7,000–20,000 for Kyushu, and strangely trusted Truman's Jan. 1953 claim about what Marshall had allegedly said before Hiroshima—that the Honshu invasion would cost 250,000–1,000,000 American casualties. Miles translated this estimate into 50,000–250,000 U.S. dead. Much of Miles's article argues that U.S. policy makers should have pursued various alternatives to the atomic bomb and that any single alternative would have ended the Pacific war before November 1, the date of the Kyushu invasion. Parts of this argument are reminiscent of Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965, rev. 1985).

3. Winston Churchill, cited by Gen. Leslie Groves in Senate Special Committee on Atomic Energy, *Atomic Energy: Hearings*, 79th Cong., 1st sess., p. 39.

4. *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman*, 1947 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 381; *ibid.*, 1948, p. 859; *ibid.*, 1949, p. 200.

5. Memoir draft 1, p. 249; draft 2, p. 683; draft 3, p. 804, Post-Presidential Memoirs Papers, Harry S. Truman Library (Independence, Missouri); Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, *Year of Decisions* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), p. 417.

6. Joint War Plans Committee, 369/1, June 15, 1945, file 384 Japan (5–3–44), Records of the Army Staff, Record Group 319, National Archives.

7. Marshall to secretary of war, June 7, 1945, with Handy to Hull, June 1, 1945, and attachment, file OPD 336 TS; Truman to secretary of war, n.d., with Herbert Hoover, "Memorandum on Ending the Japanese War," file OPD 704 TS, Records of War Department General Staff, Record Group 165, National Archives.

8. MacArthur to Marshall, June 18, 1945, file OPD 704 TS, War Department General Staff.

9. Minutes of June 18, 1945, meeting in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Berlin (Potsdam)* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), pp. 904–9; for unprinted parts, see file CCS 381 Japan (6–14–45), Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Record Group 218, National Archives.

10. Joint Staff Planners, 697/2, July 9, 1945, file 384 Japan (5–3–44), War Department General Staff.

11. J.E. Hull to Ira Eaker, Sept. 13, 1945; Eaker to Hull, Sept. 14, 1945; Arnold to FEAF [Far Eastern Air Force], Sept. 14, 1945, all in file OPD 704 PTO, War Department General Staff.