

Dealing with a WWII beast

By Scott Tubbs

Tubbs teaches history at Stevens High School. He has a master's degree in history from Oregon State University.

The 50th anniversary of V-J Day has been controversial. To many, Hiroshima and Nagasaki have become symbols of Japanese suffering — the bombings have been used to create a sense of victimization by Japan (the mayor of Nagasaki recently called the nuclear attacks the moral equivalent of the Holocaust), while forgetting the suffering imposed on others by the Japanese.

In reality, V-J Day marks the success of the United States over a bitter enemy that engaged in war atrocities. For example, Japan allowed 29 percent of its Allied prisoners of war to die in captivity (compared to just 4 percent of Allied prisoners who died while held by Germany), beheaded or left to die thousands of American and Filipino troops on the horrible Bataan Death March, and conducted "medical experiments" on Chinese prisoners. President Harry S. Truman's thoughts about using the bomb were reflected in his statement, "When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast."

Disagreement continues about how necessary the bombs were to bring about Japan's surrender. The evidence is confusing. A top-secret document approved by the Japanese Supreme War Direction Council on June 6, 1945, revealed the government's intention to "prosecute the war to the bitter end." Plans were laid to dispatch 10,000 "sui-

cide planes" and, if necessary, activate a civilian militia numbering 30 million. Yet, documentation exists that only days later, on June 20, Emperor Hirohito and some other government leaders had



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quietly decided to end the war. But on July 3, the United States received secret documents indicating that Japan's military leaders were willing to strike a deal with Russia rather than accept unconditional surrender. Indeed, Japan's toughest battle of World War II might have been the decision to stop fighting, for the Japanese centuries-old tradition called for embracing death rather than enduring the dishonor of surrender. Most leading historians today concur that Japan was committed to significant additional fighting of some sort.

Hence, Truman's decision to use the bomb on Hiroshima can be morally defended. Even though the immediate effect was the death of many innocent Japanese citizens, more would have died if Japan had been invaded. Further, many additional American lives would have been lost in such an invasion. The president had been briefed that an all-out assault on Japan would mean 600,000 American casualties in the first 30 days alone. Gen. Douglas MacArthur estimated that the resulting guerrilla warfare would cost 1 million American casualties and could last up to 10 years.

The use of the second bomb, at least so quickly, is somewhat less defensible morally. Even so, the facts are that Japan did not surrender following the Hiroshima bombing and a strong circle in Japan's military structure still wanted to fight one more great battle. Significantly, the Japanese War Council was split on whether to continue the war even after the Nagasaki bombing!

Certainly, the total destruction caused by the atomic bombs hastened Japan's surrender. But it also sent a clear message to the Soviet Union that the United States was, as leader of the free world, very well prepared to resist communist aggression worldwide, and to the rest of the world that another major war could potentially destroy civilization.

The action, then, is best explained as a combination of three factors — inflamed emotion, military momentum, and diplomatic advantage. That is to say, Pearl Harbor and other Japanese aggressions could be avenged, the war ended as quickly as possible with American lives saved, and the American post-war strength demonstrated.

The militarily aggressive and cruel Japan of the 1940s was an entirely different nation than the current conciliatory Japan of the 1990s. While it would be wrong to associate the citizenry of Japan today with the Japanese government's actions of five decades ago, it would be just as wrong to dilute the actions of either Japan or the United States during the war. Americans can afford Japan respect and friendship today and still revere the role of the United States in World War II.