

Operation Downfall – the alternative to the use of Atomic Bombs (As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on October 7, 2013)

The amazing story of what might have been the result of an invasion of the Japanese mainland on November 1, 1945, as published over the past few years (first release I can find is 1987) begins like this:

“Deep in the recesses of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., hidden for nearly four decades, lie thousands of pages of yellowing and dusty documents stamped ‘Top Secret.’ These documents, now declassified, are the plans for **Operation Downfall**, the invasion of Japan during World War II.”

The story continues, “Only a few Americans in 1945 were aware of the elaborate plans that had been prepared for the Allied invasion of the Japanese home islands. Even fewer today are aware of the defenses the Japanese had prepared to counter the invasion had it been launched.”

“*Operation Downfall* was finalized during the spring and summer of 1945. It called for two massive military undertakings to be carried out in succession and aimed at the heart of the Japanese Empire. In the first invasion - code named *Operation Olympic* - American combat troops would land on Japan by amphibious assault during the early morning hours of November 1, 1945.

“Fourteen combat divisions of soldiers and Marines would land on heavily fortified and defended Kyushu, the southernmost of the Japanese home islands, after an unprecedented naval and aerial bombardment.

“The second invasion - code named *Operation Coronet* - would send at least 22 combat divisions against one million Japanese defenders on the main island of Honshu and the Tokyo Plain.

Operation Downfall is more than an interesting “what if” piece of our past. It was a realistic look at the probability of success and what would be required to attack the mainland of Japan. It was based on actual experience in the Pacific using factually accurate body counts resulting from invasions of various Japanese held islands. It was a plan of attack that used previous landings to strategize the best possible approaches, yet it also laid out the likely casualties, hundreds of thousands or maybe even a million or more deaths!

The invasion plans included many invasion forces at multiple landing sites. In discussing the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan with World War II veterans, I find that everyone who was on a ship headed toward Japan when the war ended knew they were headed toward a massive invasion of the Japanese mainland. So, *Operation Downfall*, while the exact details may not have been shared, the overall objective was common knowledge among the multitude of forces being moved toward Japan.

These same veterans, without fail, tell me that they truly believe that were it not for the atomic bombs that they would very likely have died on that invasion. These individuals don't hesitate to express their thanks to the people who worked to create the atomic bombs. They understood what lay ahead for them and experienced a huge relief when the war ended so abruptly. They were NOT expecting that. They are eternally grateful to the people who worked diligently in the secret places of Oak Ridge, Los Alamos and Hanford.

Richard B. Frank wrote in *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*, that a study done for Secretary of War Henry Stimson's staff by William Shockley estimated that conquering Japan would cost 1.7–4 million American casualties, including 400,000–800,000 fatalities, and five to ten million Japanese fatalities. A key assumption was large-scale participation by civilians in the defense of Japan.

The use of atomic bombs resulted in far less destruction than would have been the case if the invasion with its attendant fire-bombing of all the remaining Japanese cities had in fact occurred. People working at Oak Ridge, Hanford and Los Alamos had no way to fully appreciate what they were accomplishing.

They only knew they were working on something to help win the war, not that they were helping make a decision to stop the war with the lowest number of deaths possible. For sure the majority never dreamed they were working on ushering in the Nuclear Age!

Operation Downfall – the alternative to the use of Atomic Bombs (As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on October 7, 2013)

The question of what actually produced the surrender of Japan surfaced almost immediately after World War II ended. The same question still exists with regard to the actual reason or reasons for the Japanese decision to surrender. The debate focuses on whether the use of atomic bombs was necessary to produce the surrender.

I have always held that the atomic bomb made from Uranium 235 produced at Oak Ridge and the atomic bomb made from Plutonium produced at Hanford, Washington both manufactured at Los Alamos, New Mexico, were THE key elements that led to the surrender decision made by the Japanese Emperor Hirohito. This position is held by many who have studied the issue, but not all.

On August 15, 1945, the Japanese people heard for the first time ever the voice of "His Majesty the Emperor" on the radio saying, "Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is, indeed, incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should we continue to fight, not only would it result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization."

I think he fully knew the awesome power of the atomic bomb. He was aware that an atomic bomb program existed in Japan. He is said to have been reluctant in his support for that program.

Hirohito lived from April 29, 1901 – January 7, 1989. He became the 124th emperor of Japan on December 25, 1926. To properly consider his reign as emperor one must look at the totality of the advances of the Japanese people over that period. By the end of his reign Japan had again gained a high status among the world's major economies.

While the militarist were reluctant to surrender and were determined to fight to the last individual, even they could not effectively countermand the emperor's decision. He ruled and ultimately he decided.

On page 518 of Chapter 23, *The Decision To Use the Atomic Bomb*, of an essay published online in the U. S. Army Center for Military History, by Louis Morton, is found, "It would be a fruitless task to weigh accurately the relative importance of all the factors leading to the Japanese surrender. There is no doubt that Japan had been defeated by the summer of 1945, if not earlier. But defeat did not mean that the military clique had given up; the Army intended to fight on and had made elaborate preparations for the defense of the homeland."

"Whether air bombardment and naval blockade or the threat of invasion would have produced an early surrender and averted the heavy losses almost certain to accompany the actual landings in Japan is a moot question. Certainly they had a profound effect on the Japanese position. It is equally difficult to assert categorically that the atomic bomb alone or Soviet intervention alone was the decisive factor in bringing the war to an end.

"All that can be said on the available evidence is that Japan was defeated in the military sense by August 1945 and that the bombing of Hiroshima, followed by the Soviet Union's declaration of war and the bombing of Nagasaki and the threat of still further bombing, acted as catalytic agents to produce the Japanese decision to surrender. Together they created so extreme a crisis that the Emperor himself, in an unprecedented move, took matters into his own hands and ordered his ministers to surrender.

Secretary of War, Henry Stimson said in the conclusion of his report, *The Decision to Use the Bomb* (February 1947), "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.

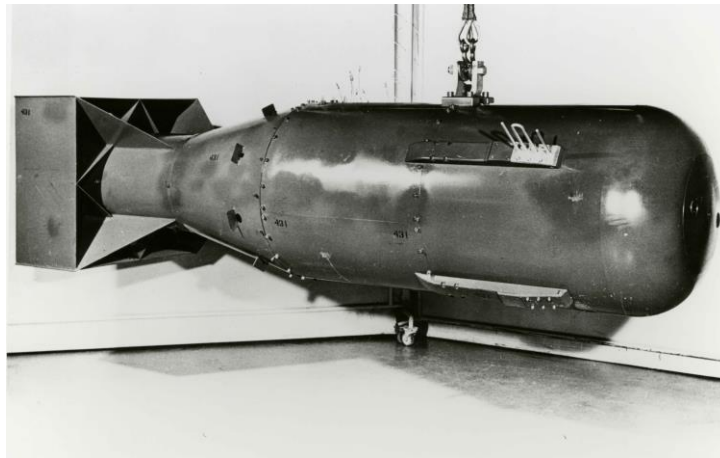
"Now, with the release of atomic energy, man's ability to destroy himself is nearly complete. The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended a war. They also made it wholly clear that we must never

Operation Downfall – the alternative to the use of Atomic Bombs (As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on October 7, 2013)

have another war. This is the lesson man 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.

So, with a sense of pride in accomplishment, Oak Ridgers today should not hesitate to hold forth the idea that the atomic bomb, which had its origin in the uranium 235 separated here, helped lead directly to the surrender of Japan and the end of World War II. The Manhattan Project National Historical Park will tell this story fully and will help us validate the premise with detailed explanations and experiential learning opportunities.

It is also worth noting that for 68 years we have not had another world war! Might that be credited to the existence of nuclear weapons? However, the drastic change from the Cold War to terrorism-based warfare with its fanatical leadership may ultimately require another Manhattan Project type effort to deal effectively with that threat to freedom!



Little Boy, the world's first atomic bomb ever used in warfare – uranium bomb using uranium 235 separated at Y-12 – photo by Ed Westcott



Famous "War End" photo by Ed Westcott shows the jubilation exhibited by Oak Ridger's at the news that the awful killing war was over

**Operation Downfall – the alternative to the use of Atomic Bombs
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on October 7, 2013)**



Newspaper published on August 6, 1945, the same day that Little Boy was dropped on Hiroshima the first of two atomic bombs leading to the end of the war – photo by Ed Westcott



Newspapers announce the end of World War II – photo by Ed Westcott