

*Countdown 1945: The Extraordinary Story of the Atomic Bomb and the 116 Days that Changed the World*  
Chris Wallace with Mitch Weiss  
New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020

reviewed by Michael Flynn

This review is intended for students on the Carleton Linguistics in Japan study abroad program. One of the excursions on the program is to Hiroshima.

I think the standard story of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, goes something like this:

After the successful test of the bomb on July 16, 1945, there were now two, exactly two, ways to end the war in the Pacific. One was to mount a land invasion of the main Japanese islands, an operation that by all accounts would cost thousands of American lives. The bomb provided a second possibility. Dropping it would likely convince the Japanese that the war was unwinnable, and they would be moved to accept the unconditional surrender demanded by the Allies.

President Truman carefully weighed these options. He listened attentively to voices raised against using the weapon, and understood it would mark a dramatic and dangerous new era in international relations. He diligently interrogated his staff, especially on the questions of whether or not to provide a demonstration explosion, and whether or not to warn the Japanese ahead of time that the bomb was coming. In the end, he regretfully but forcefully decided to drop the weapon without warning on Hiroshima.

He had insisted that the bomb be dropped on a military installation, and said this in his address to the nation on August 9. Incredibly, the Japanese government had no reaction to destruction of Hiroshima, which thus required the bombing of Nagasaki three days later. Finally, the Japanese surrendered.

American soldiers were sometimes rambunctious, sometimes naughty, sometimes blunt and ill-mannered, but they were highly skilled, willing to endure hardship with good humor, and completely dedicated to winning the war for their country. There were sometimes tensions between them, but they recognized the greater goal of the preservation of freedom and democracy, which always led them to work together and ultimately prevail.

It appears to me that the authors of this book want to tell this story, but realize that research over the last seven decades undermines much of it. They thus have to mention some (but not all) of the conflicting evidence, but always very briefly and without connecting it to the main narrative. Sometimes they appear to just make things up. In this review, I will briefly discuss two issues every book about the bombing must engage as exemplars of how these authors treat this very important story.

From my point of view, there are two main questions concerning the use of the bomb.

1. Was the bombing of Hiroshima (and Nagasaki) the best way to end the war? And was it actually instrumental in forcing the Japanese surrender?

## 2. Was the bomb intentionally dropped on a civilian population?

These are complicated issues, but I think the answers to these questions are no, no, and yes. I have been convinced by Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's amazing, meticulously researched 2005 book *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan*. (Incredibly, Wallace and Weiss do not cite this book at all. You can read a review of it here: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/12840/reviews/13273/mcnay-hasegawa-racing-enemy-stalin-truman-and-surrender-japan>.) I won't go into this very much in this review, but I strongly recommend the book and it will be in our library in Kyoto.

I'll give a couple of examples of how the Wallace and Weiss treat these questions. First on ending the war.

On p. 162, they write:

Despite all his misgivings, Truman knew he had to drop the bomb. The Manhattan Project had given him a weapon to potentially end the war. And no matter how devastating their losses, the Japanese refused to surrender. They left him no choice.

Actually, though, he did have a choice, in fact he had at least two more. (The idea of invading the Japanese mainland, at a cost of tens of thousands of American lives, had been largely set aside once the availability of the bomb was known.) One was to modify the demand for unconditional surrender to make it slightly ambiguous, and thus a point for negotiation, about the future of the emperor, who the Japanese regarded as a deity. It was known to the Americans, though maybe not to Truman, because of what are known as the Magic intercepts, that the Japanese were appealing to the Russians to intercede for them with the Americans. (The Russians had signed a non-aggression pact with the Japanese, and they were of course American allies.) At this point, Japan was absolutely devastated and they were eager to end the war, but they wanted to preserve the imperial house. Henry Stimson, Truman's Secretary of War, repeatedly argued for pursuing this line. The complexity of the situation makes a firm judgment difficult, but it is clear that the Magic intercepts offered an opportunity to potentially end the war without either an invasion or the dropping of the atomic bomb.

Wallace and Weiss:

Using what was called "Magic" equipment to break codes, Truman was reading "ultra top secret: communications from [Japan's] Foreign Minister Togo to Japan's Ambassador Sato in Moscow. The Japanese hoped to get Stalin to sign on to a peace deal, weakening the leverage of the United States and Britain... Secretary Stimson and Admiral Leahy both advised the president that the United States should drop its demand for "unconditional" surrender... Secretary of State Byrnes disagreed... Byrnes felt if Truman now softened the terms in his first months in office, the American public would "crucify" him. (p. 148-49)

The description here is tendentious, but what's maddening is that there is no reference. Truman was reading the intercepts? That was their interpretation? (Hasegawa sees the intercepts as requesting Russia to mediate with the Americans to end the war, though the story is complicated and

Hasegawa's discussion of the intercepts is extensive.) Truman decided to bomb Hiroshima because not to do so would make him unpopular? These are important ideas the book does not support.

On p. 96 they write:

But the president knew softening the terms for surrender in any way would be politically explosive. He was not ready to try to change public opinion on the matter.

Once again, there is no reference here. To what extent did Truman consider negotiation over the bombing? The book does not address this issue in any meaningful way.

The other possibility was to let the Russians enter the war, as Stalin assured Truman he was preparing to do at Potsdam, and thus threaten to seize Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost main island. Hasegawa takes the surprise (to the Japanese) Russian declaration of war on August 8 to be the decisive event that triggered surrender. The evidence he offers for this is extensive.

Wallace and Weiss appear to endorse the view that Russia's entry in the war against Japan would be crucial. Just before the Potsdam conference began, and before Truman knew about the availability of the bomb, the two leaders met.

Then Stalin told Truman he would keep the promise he made at Yalta – to declare war on Japan by mid-August. The president was astonished – and greatly relieved. [No reference MF] This was Truman's main objective in coming to Potsdam. And here he had just accomplished it before the conference even started. Truman put it bluntly in his diary, "He'll be in the Jap War on August 15<sup>th</sup>. Fini Japs when that comes about." (p. 137)

Wallace and Weiss summarize Truman's success at Potsdam:

Still, for all that, Truman got the one thing he wanted most from Potsdam before the conference even started: Stalin's commitment to enter the war against Japan in August. The president's satisfaction with that one pledge showed how much he still questioned whether the atomic bomb would work in a real-world situation – and even if it did, whether it would force the Japanese to surrender. Stalin's promise gave Truman an effective Plan B for the war in the Pacific. (p. 187 [no reference])

So here, it looks like letting the Russians trigger the end of the war, as Hasegawa claims they in fact did, is prominent in Truman's mind. But later in the book, they write:

Some historians [again, no reference MF] argue Japan would have surrendered in 1945 – without the United States either dropping the bomb or invading the homeland. Russia declared war on Japan on August 8, sending one million Soviet troops into Japanese - occupied Manchuria. There is also the question of whether Truman could have made it clearer to leaders in Tokyo that he would accept a role for the emperor as part of "unconditional surrender." But all this has the enormous benefit of hindsight, in many cases after decisions were made. (p. 254)

I am not sure what that last sentence means, but we know for sure, and Wallace and Weiss explicitly note this, that the role of the emperor and the Russian entry into the war were prominently

discussed at the time. If this is a recognition that Truman made a grave mistake, it would be more honest of the authors if they just said so. But that would go against the preferred narrative for the American behavior in the war.

Another major question about the bombing is whether or not a civilian population was targeted. In spite of Truman's statement to the nation on August 9, in which he said that the bomb was dropped on a military target, it is now known that this was untrue. The bomb was aimed at a civilian population. The bombardier on the Enola Gay chose the "aiming point," a bridge on the edge of a densely packed civilian neighborhood. (p. 189) It is not mentioned there that civilians were the target, but the book does mention on p. 262 that civilian casualties far outnumbered military.

We know now that American bombers targeted dozens of Japanese cities, with little or no concern about civilian casualties. In fact, on the night of March 9-10, 1945, American planes dropped incendiary bombs on the civilian population in Tokyo, killing around 100,000 people and making over 1 million homeless. Wallace and Weiss mention this on p. 163. But this is not connected to the false claim by Truman that the Hiroshima bomb did not target noncombatants. Was Truman deceived, or was he lying in his August 9 speech? Wallace and Weiss do not raise, much less address, this question.

There is much more to be said about how this book portrays the end of the Pacific War. It is soothing to those who want to believe that Americans are always righteous, sincere, competent, and only reluctantly violent. I have never seen Fox News, but I understand that Chris Wallace is one of only a very few on-screen personalities who will actually stand up to President Trump. I would like to be more enthusiastic about his account of this very central event in American history. But it downplays or ignores significant parts of the story that would lead to a more nuanced and accurate view of what happened on August 6, 1945.

*Countdown 1945: The Extraordinary Story of the Atomic Bomb and the 116 Days that Changed the World* and *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* as well as other books and materials on the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will be in our library in Kyoto.