

One Million Saved: The Moral Conflict of Henry Stimson

By:

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The February 1947 issue of *Harper's Magazine* caught the attention of millions of Americans upon its release. The cover, bold black letters against a white background, proclaimed, "Henry L. Stimson, Former Secretary of War, Explains Why We Used the Atomic Bomb."

Fifteen months after his retirement as Secretary of War, the aging political leader would finally explain to the American people why he recommended to President Truman that the atomic bomb was the best way to end the Second World War, the alternative being an invasion of Japan.^a In his essay, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," Stimson makes one of the most famous assertions concerning the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: it saved one million American lives from injury or death by making the invasion of Japan unnecessary.

There is just one problem with this justification: Stimson made it up. In no document produced by the Joint Chiefs of Staff concerning Operation Downfall exists such a number or anything close to it. Why did Stimson propose an inflated casualty rate when he knew the JCS suggested a much lower number to President Truman? The answer lies in Stimson's diary and other writings. Stimson was very conflicted when it came to his role in the development and the use of the atomic bomb. By misleading the American public in his essay, Stimson quelled the nation's and his uncertainty.

^a Operation Downfall

The historical debate over the necessity of the atomic bomb in the Second World War is a vast and complicated topic. This essay will focus on how Stimson's role influenced his mental state and actions.

This essay contains three parts. The first means to show that Stimson's casualty estimate was grossly overinflated. The JCS documents on Operation Downfall build a case against Stimson in this regard. The second part of the essay uses other relevant documents, most importantly Stimson's diary, to understand his motivations during the war years. This section shows a conflict between Stimson's view of nuclear weapons and his recommendation to President Truman. The existence of a conflict indicates that he was morally confused about nuclear weapons, a possible motive for fabricating causality estimates. The essay hopes to prove this stipulation. This essay's third and final part is a comparison with similar scholarly works. This comparison should allow the reader to see where this author's opinion differs from others.

Though Stimson was an important historical figure of twentieth-century American history, only two biographies of his life exist: *Turmoil and Tradition* by Elting Morison and *The Colonel* by Godfrey Hodgson. *Turmoil and Tradition*, written in 1960, does not mention "On the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" in its final chapter dealing with Stimson's last years. By 1960, JCS documents concerning the causality rate for Operation Downfall were already declassified.

To its credit, *The Colonel* attempts to delve into Stimson's mind to dispel the myth that Stimson was a "figure cast in bronze without traced of human weakness."¹ Yet this section is very brief, a quick speculation on how infertility affected Stimson's state of mind throughout his life. It is also too short, coming at the end of a biography praising Stimson's diplomatic career. Hodgson even notes that what he has written "is not to diminish admiration for him (Stimson)."²

A critical secondary source is needed for a legitimate discussion of any historical figure. The one legitimate issue to criticize Stimson concerns his involvement in dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The article he wrote for *Harper's* falls within this category, as Stimson intended to justify the bombing.

Stimson reached outside his government expertise during the war years the moment he attempted to predict Operation Downfall's casualty rate. "I was the senior adviser on the military employment of atomic energy," Stimson writes in "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb."³ How could Stimson compute a reliable estimate of American casualties if he was involved directly with the development of the atomic bomb rather than the invasion of Japan? In Stimson's memoirs of his political life, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, coauthor McGeorge Bundy writes that Stimson was "never directly concerned in the handling of Pacific strategy."⁴ Though a soldier in the First World War, Stimson's responsibilities as Secretary of War differed significantly from those of a military leader.

To suggest a reason why Stimson proposed an inflated casualty rate, the evidence must show that his estimate was not reasonable. The plans for Operation Downfall were not a 'Plan B' if the atomic bomb failed. Developed independently, the plans were approved by the JCS as the United States' campaign plan against Japan to end the Pacific War. In addition, the secrecy of the atomic bomb's development led many generals, including General MacArthur, to believe that Operation Downfall was the only means of victory.

That did not mean army generals thought ill of the plan. In fact, when General Marshall asked General MacArthur his opinion of Operation Downfall, General MacArthur replied with praise. "I believe," General MacArthur wrote in a telegram, "the operation presents less hazards

of excessive loss than any other that has been suggested. . . I regard the operation as the most economical one in effort and lives that is possible.”⁵

The plans include invasion sites, Japanese troop strength, pre-emptive bombing campaigns, and the all-important predicted casualty rates of U.S. soldiers. To debunk Stimson’s numbers, a selection of this data must go under scrutiny to eventually show that any conclusions the JCS made from the same data were valid.

Some of the earliest information about Operation Downfall comes from an 18 August 1943 note from the JCS entitled “Appreciation and Plan for the Defeat of Japan.” In point four, the note states that:

“the Combined Staff Planners consider that the measures set forth as being necessary for the defeat of JAPAN...the destruction of Japanese sea and air forces, the blockade of JAPAN, and the large scale bombing of the Japanese homeland as a preliminary to the possible invasion of JAPAN, are sound.”⁶

With this fragment, the Staff Planners began to draft Pacific strategy around what would become Operation Downfall. In the appendix of the same note, the Planners write that, “we do not believe that it will be necessary to carry out the whole program of operation in order to defeat them (the Japanese).”⁷ Only twenty months into the war, the United States was sure it would be victorious against Japan, yet the means and time of victory were still unknown to Staff Planners. No one knew at the time if the future conditions of the war would necessitate an invasion. Time, though, would soon answer this question.

Other documents from 1943 attempt to ‘size up’ the Japanese soldier as an enemy in an attempt to understand his weaknesses. In a 2 October 1943 note entitled “The Japanese Situation,” the document notes that, “Faced with the unexpected, the Japanese are apt to show a

weakness in minor tactics amounting almost to stupidity.”⁸ Though the note concedes that the Japanese had an advantage in jungle warfare, their ability to adapt to changes on an open battlefield was nonexistent. This note no doubt had an influence on the Staff Planners’ decision to target the Kanto Plain for an invasion. Not only the location of Tokyo, the Kanto Plain did not offer any of the jungle features from where the Japanese could carry out guerilla warfare.

Later on, Section C of the same note bolsters the case for invasion by examining the psychology of Japanese soldiers. Concluding that the average Japanese soldier would fight to the death, the section ends with, “We must therefore aim rather at the Japanese capacity to continue resistance than to the Japanese will to resist. This might involve the invasion of Japan.”⁹ Though the view that the Japanese soldier was a fatalist may seem at first glance to be a discouragement to invasion, this assumption led to the decision to destroy as much of the Japanese war machine as possible before one American soldier set foot on Japan.

Only two days later, on 4 October 1943, the Staff Planners created the preliminary plan to destroy the “Japanese capacity to continue resistance” that the 2 October note emphasized. Operation Plan Twilight deployed ten B-29 bomber groups to Calcutta to facilitate, “the destruction of the Japanese capacity for the effective resistance to invasion.”¹⁰ Twilight’s quick inception shows the importance that the still unplanned invasion was having on military strategy.

By 4 November 1943, the JCS finally decided to authorize the creation of Operation Downfall. In “The Defeat of Japan Within Twelve Months After the Defeat of Germany,” the Staff Planners agreed that the overall objective in defeating Japan was to, “Force the unconditional surrender of Japan by invading her homeland...with the ultimate objective of invading Honshu not later than the spring of 1946.”¹¹ From the recommendations made in this

report, the planning began in earnest, less than two years before the planned invasion of Kyushu: 1 November 1945.

Less than a month later, the Staff Planners forwarded the “Overall Plan for the Defeat of Japan” to the JCS. This 2 December 1943 report was the first complete draft of the invasion plan. Like the note of 18 August, one of the report’s assumptions is that the “invasion of the principal Japanese islands may not be necessary and the defeat of Japan may be accomplished by sea and air blockade and intensive air bombardment from progressively advanced bases.”¹² Despite this assumption, the plan is highly detailed for a first draft. In Tab D, the Joint Staff Planners estimated the Japanese aerial strength of one hundred aircraft in Kyushu and sixteen hundred aircraft in Honshu on 1 November 1945.¹³

In Tab E, the Staff Planners present the plan for the American military strength for the invasion of Southern Kyushu and the Tokyo Plain. In Comparison with Tab D, the Staff Planners created a 28:1 ratio in air superiority in the Kyushu campaign and a 2:1 ratio in the Honshu campaign.¹⁴ The Staff Planners wanted to ensure American air superiority in this invasion. In the 10 July 1945 “Japanese Reaction to an Assault on the Kanto Plain (Tokyo) of Honshu,” the Staff Planners expanded on this theme by suggesting, “Japanese aircraft...will have been largely dissipated during the Kyushu operations. Serviceability of remaining aircraft would be extremely low and we estimate that a maximum of 100 sorties could be flow against us during a 24-hour period.”¹⁵ Even though the ratio for the Honshu campaign was 2:1 in the 1943 draft, by 1945, the Staff Planners had devised how to dispatch with the remainder of the Japanese air force before the manned invasion.

The examined documents present only a fraction of the total information on Operation Downfall. The result of almost two years of planning, the extensive “Details of the Campaign

Against Japan,” was finally finished on 16 June 1945, with “The Joint Staff Planners recommend that the Enclosure be presented to the President” written on the cover.¹⁶

Two days later, Stimson was present at a meeting with President Truman and the JCS to go over the report of 16 June. In the minutes of the meeting, General Marshall presented the information concerning expected casualties. “Our experience in the Pacific war is so diverse as to casualties that it is considered wrong to give any estimate in numbers.” His next words were the only definitive casualty estimate given for the invasion of Kyushu. “There is no reason to believe that the first 30 days in Kyushu should not exceed the price we have paid for Luzon.”¹⁷ In a reference chart provided within the document, the data shows that the Luzon campaign cost the United States thirty-one thousand casualties while American forces killed one hundred and fifty-six thousand Japanese.^a

Stimson, already having read the report of 16 June, knew that the JCS predicted the end of the Pacific War by mid-1946. The JCS also predicted that the Kanto Plain invasion would suffer a comparable casualty rate in the first month and taper down as the campaign progressed. Considering a worst-case scenario where the casualty rate remained constant, the highest casualty rate Stimson could have come up with is approximately four hundred and thirty-four thousand casualties if the war had ended by the end of July 1946.^{18 b}

No one will know how many American soldiers would have died in Operation Downfall. The issue, though, is why Stimson presented information that was not credible to the American public. Every document the JCS produced concerning Operation Downfall contains no mention,

^a Others present expressed their opinion as well. Admiral Leahy suggested a 35% causality rate in Kyushu, (the same rate as in Okinawa) while Admiral King disagreed. Admiral King said that since the American forces would land at three beaches in Kyushu (only one in Okinawa) that the causality rate would only be half of Okinawa’s. General Marshall’s opinion is given precedence in this essay because of his position and that no one present attempted to refute him. The Pentagon, Minutes of a Meeting held at the White House.

^b If the war in Japan ended on 1 August 1946, the Kyushu campaign would have lasted nine months, while the Honshu campaign would have lasted five months. $(31,000 \times 9) + (31,000 \times 5) = 434,000$ Casualties

suggestion, or warning that the U.S. would incur a million casualties due to invading Japan. Stimson was the only government official to put that specific number into print.

Before proceeding further, the essay should note that Stimson was not the only person in the Oval Office on 18 June 1945 to later give an unsatisfactory answer to his fellow Americans concerning the Operation Downfall casualty estimate. President Truman gives wildly different numbers in two letters written years after he left office. These letters prove that the since the government had not come to a consensus on a casualty estimate of approximately four hundred and fifty thousand, an interpretation was going to be made at some point. The first letter, written on 5 August 1963 to Irv Kupcinec of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, responded to a column Kupcinec wrote concerning the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. "It was done," Truman writes in his reply, "to save 125,000 youngsters on the American side and 125,000 on the Japanese side from getting killed and that is what it (the atomic bomb) did."¹⁹ Though President Truman's estimation is much lower than Stimson's, his argument seems clear cut, that is, until the end of the letter.

In the fifth and final paragraph, Truman quadruples the causality rate by writing, "I knew what I was doing when I stopped the war that would have killed a half million youngsters on both sides if those bombs had not been dropped."²⁰ Two hundred and fifty thousand deaths turn into a million in the space of three paragraphs. These numbers are an inconsistency that will be continued by the President in later correspondence.

In another letter written on 4 August of the following year to a Mrs. Klein, President Truman uses completely different causality numbers than in his letter to Kupcinec. "It (the atomic bomb) was a means to end the war and save 250,000 men from being killed on our side and that many of the Japanese side, plus twice that many being injured for life."²¹

Though President Truman's casualty figures in these two cases are wildly different, President Truman tells his reader in both letters to look at his memoirs for further clarification. In the two volumes of *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman*, only one reference exists to the amount of American life lost through a hypothetical invasion of Japan. "Our military experts had estimated," Truman writes in volume one, "that the invasion of Japan would have cost at least five hundred thousand American casualties."²² Yet even though the two letters and President Truman's memoirs contradict each other four times, it is certain that when the 18 June 1945 meeting ended, no military official had suggested that over half a million American soldiers would become casualties. Even though President Truman was inconsistent, his numbers lie much closer to the number General Marshall indicated on 18 June 1945 than what Stimson wrote in "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb."

The entirety of the JCS documents written on Operation Downfall effectively debunks Stimson's justification. This essay can now explore why Stimson fabricated the casualty estimate. This essay proposes that Stimson's guilt caused by having a hand in the decision to use the atomic bomb was the reason for his figure.

Through an analysis of "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," Stimson's diary, and his memoirs, evidence supporting this essay's thesis reveals itself. Since Stimson's diary ends on 22 September 1945, only then will the information in the autobiography take precedence. Stimson's own words come first.

To begin, Stimson's later writings suggest a strong duty to his country embedded within his assertion that the atomic bomb prevented a million American casualties. To Stimson, the dropping of the atomic bomb was something that had to be done to end the war. The language

used in a specific section of the Harper's essay illustrates Stimson's patriotic duty. In his personal summary at the end of "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," Stimson writes:

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.²³

A diary entry from two years earlier proves that Stimson's sense of duty was consistent before and after the dropping of the atomic bomb. The entry in question falls sometime between 26 and 30 June 1945. In it, Stimson recounts a meeting of the Committee of Three^a where project S-1^b was the topic of the day. Stimson writes of the conversation:

I took up at once the subject of trying to get Japan to surrender by giving her a warning after she had been sufficiently pounded possibly with S-1. This is a matter about which I feel very strongly and feel that the country will not be satisfied unless every effort is made to shorten the war.²⁴

Both passages show Stimson's ultimate goal in using the atomic bomb was to save American lives by shortening the war. However, nowhere in his diary does Stimson mention that the atomic bomb would save any other specific number of American lives if used on Japan. Stimson clearly created the justification for using the bomb after the end of the Second World War.

Stimson does not use the atomic bomb as an 'ends justify the means' defense in "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb." He cannot. Though Stimson wanted to use the atomic bomb

^a The Secretary of War, The Secretary of the Navy, and The Secretary of State

^b The Atomic Bomb

to save American lives, the morality of his involvement in the atomic bomb project weighed heavily on him in the war years. In a 31 May 1945 diary entry, Stimson recounts a meeting of the Interim Committee.^a Present that day were scientists contributing to the Manhattan Project, including Drs. Oppenheimer and Fermi. General Groves, the military commander of the Manhattan Project, also attended.

After thanking the scientists present for their contribution to atomic research, Stimson gave a very moving speech concerning the progress of the atomic bomb and its place in the future of humanity. In his diary, Stimson recalls what he said that day:

I told them that we did not regard it as a new weapon merely but as a revolutionary change in the relations of man to the universe and that we wanted to take advantage of this; that the project might even mean the doom of civilization...that it might be a Frankenstein which would eat us up.²⁵

Stimson, in the same speech, hoped that nuclear energy would help bring the "perfection of civilization." He still believed that atomic research could redeem itself by benefiting humanity. Yet what matters most from this passage is that Stimson felt a conflict between where nuclear energy might lead the world and his part in allowing that process to happen.

Events surrounding the 31 May meeting give another insight into Stimson's mental state. The documents so far show that Stimson was consistent in his beliefs - The atomic bomb ended the war quickly, thus saving countless American lives. That being the case, a sentence from the 31 May 1945 diary entry raises questions. "I think we made an impression upon the scientists," Stimson writes, "that we were looking at this like statesmen and did not like merely soldiers anxious to win the war at any cost." It is hard to say if Stimson actively deceived the scientists or

^a The Interim Committee, as Stimson put it in *"On the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb"*, "was charged with the function of advising the President on the various questions raised by our apparently imminent success in developing an atomic weapon." Henry Stimson, *Harper's Magazine*, Feb. 1947, p. 100.

rather was waiting until the first atomic bomb test to see if the technology would be ready in time. Either way, Stimson made the recommendation for the atomic bomb's use. If this moral complication affected Stimson as well, his desire to justify his recommendation to President Truman would have been greater than previously thought.

By 1947, Stimson's view on nuclear weapons had taken a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn despite the *Harper's* essay. Stimson's memoirs contain a language entirely different from that in "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb." "The riven atom uncontrolled," Stimson is quoted as saying in his autobiography, "can only be a growing menace to us all...upon us, as the people who first harnessed and made use of this force, there rests a grave and continuing responsibility for leadership, turning it toward life, not death."²⁶ There is no mention of nuclear energy leading mankind to prosperity. Rather, Stimson sees nuclear energy as something akin to a wild beast, a certain death unless restrained.

Though Stimson still supported his previous actions, his new views did not escape even "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb." "Now, with the release of atomic energy," Stimson writes, "man's ability to destroy himself is very nearly complete. The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended the war. They also made it wholly clear that we must never have another war...There is no other choice."²⁷ If Stimson truly believed he had helped unleash such a force upon the world, what better justification could he have used for doing so than saving American lives in the process?

One must remember that Americans who questioned the use of the atomic bomb in 1945-47 were questioning from a moralistic standpoint. The American public could not access JCS documents. With media suppression in Japan during the occupation, only scarce literary

pieces helped Americans understand the destructive force of the atomic bomb.^a John Hersey's 1946 essay for *The New Yorker*, *Hiroshima*, fueled the American people's moral confusion. Hersey writes of the experience of a Ms. Sasaki. She recalls that in the hours after the bombing that a man, "brought two horribly wounded people—a woman with a whole breast sheared off and a man whose face as all raw from burn...before nightfall the three grotesques under the slanting piece of twisted iron began to smell quite bad."²⁸ These accounts cast doubt in the minds of Americans who had regarded the dropping of the atomic bomb as an unquestionable good.

Stimson's article was the perfect solution to not only his internal conflict but also that of the American people. After Americans read that ten of their soldiers came out of the war alive or unhurt for every Japanese person that died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, how could they not believe that the atomic bomb was the best moral choice? As the cover of Harper's proclaimed, it was not Stimson, the JCS, or even President Truman who dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but "We": the whole nation was responsible. Though Stimson was probably one of the first to feel it, the country needed a cure for its uncertainties concerning using the atomic bomb. Though works like *Hiroshima* created a moment of moral questioning, Stimson's essay made Americans believe the bombing was justified.

To fully understand Stimson's mindset, this essay should compare its conclusions to those found in other works. In the last fifteen years, only one work shares the theme of Operation Downfall and Stimson's involvement in the deployment of the atomic bomb - *Code-Name Downfall: The Secret Plan to Invade Japan-And Why Truman Dropped the Bomb* by Thomas B. Allen and Norman Polmar. The two authors emphasize Stimson's influence on the use of the

^a Not until January 1947 was the American public able to access any scientific documents concerning the development of the atomic bomb. Though highly technical, the documents were the public's first look into how these weapons worked. Monica Braw. *The Atomic Bomb Suppressed: American Censorship in Occupied Japan* (Armonk: East Gate, 1991), 115.

atomic bomb. “His (President Truman) mentor would be Stimson,” Allen and Polmar write of President Truman’s early days in office. Stimson was a man, “who nearly two years before had dismissed Truman as an untrustworthy nuisance.”²⁹ Allen and Polmar not only lead the reader to believe that Stimson had nothing but contempt for President Truman, but also that Stimson commanded authority over him concerning the atomic bomb because of his long involvement in the federal government. If this were indeed the case, Stimson’s mental uncertainties were worse than this essay suggests due to the higher level of influence Stimson held over Truman.

Allen and Polmar attempt later in their book to disprove the first part of this author’s essay. “Secretary of War Stimson made a similar estimate in his postwar memoirs,” Allen and Polmar write of *On Active Service in Peace And War*. “These numbers were intentionally exaggerated, critics argue, to justify the dropping of the bomb.”³⁰ The two authors then quote sources outside the government during the Second World War to prove the validity of Stimson’s argument. As Secretary of War, Stimson’s estimates were not coming from outside the government. Military sources gave him no reason to believe that America would incur more than five hundred thousand casualties during an invasion of Japan.

The terminology of George Orwell best describes the mental dilemma that Henry Stimson faced in the last five years of his life: doublethink. To justify his recommendation to President Truman and his moral position, Stimson had to convince himself that General Marshall, a trusted friend and experienced general, was inaccurate in his casualty estimate on 18 June 1945. Stimson held these two contradicting ideas by making up his own casualty estimate while helping other Americans do the same. Though the casualty estimate for Operation Downfall will remain a heated debate for many years to come, the author hopes that light shed on Henry

Stimson's moral dilemma will raise more questions concerning the assertions made in "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb."

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