H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

J. Samuel Walker. *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. ix + 142 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4662-9; $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2361-3.

Reviewed by Roger Chapman (American Culture Studies Program, Bowling Green State University)

Published on H-US-Japan (November, 1999)

Demythologizing Truman's Decision to Drop Atomic Bombs

J. Samuel Walker has produced a very succinct volume, perhaps too succinct, on the decision of the United States to use atomic bombs against Japan during World War II. Here is a brave attempt to bridge two diametrically opposed positions–one side stating that the bombings were militarily necessary for ending the war and the other claiming that the bombings were an unjustified and inhumane show of American military force for the purpose of intimidating the Soviet Union. To the important questions of this overall discussion the author answers, in a mere hundred and ten pages, both "yes" and "no."

Prompt and Utter Destruction was written out of a response to the debate surrounding the 1995 commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WW II. One controversy, in particular, centered around the "Enola Gay" exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC. However, this book is not about how the anniversary should have been observed, but rather its concern is the question of how historical remembrance gets constructed to either justify or condemn Truman's decision. Walker warns about presentism creeping into today's readings of yesteryear's texts. Also, he suggests that counterfactual arguments are a problem in the overall debate because speculation about what might have happened is sometimes treated as if it were on par with hard evidence (p. 100). At once Walker asserts that it is indeed a myth that Truman felt he only had a choice between invading Japan or using the atomic bombs. The statements made by Truman and others for this kind of framing– invade or drop the Bomb– are authentic but were made after the war. Walker notes that there were other options for ending the war. Many in the Pentagon felt that the war could eventually end without an invasion. As for the cost in human terms for launching an invasion, the same military planners projected American casualty figures far less than what would later be cited (pp. 5-6). However, the desire for ending the war more quickly was a major factor (pp. 19, 34, 74).

Walker explains: The fundamental question is, Was the bomb necessary? In view of the evidence now available, the answer is yes and no. Yes, the bomb was necessary to end the war at the earliest possible moment. And yes, the bomb was necessary to save the lives of American troops, perhaps numbering in the several thousands. But no, the bomb was probably not necessary to end the war within a fairly short time without an invasion of Japan. And no, the bomb was not necessary to save the lives of *hundreds* of thousands of American troops (pp. 96-97).

As for whether or not the dropping of the atomic bombs was an intentional display of might toward the Kremlin, Walker states that there was "the hope that the bomb would help advance American diplomatic objectives, especially in addressing the growing differences with the Soviet Union" (pp. 19). The evidence suggests, in fact, that Truman and other American leaders began to act more assertive toward the Soviet Union once they

learned details of the bomb's power (pp. 62-63). Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson quickly concluded that the Soviet Union was no longer important for forcing Japan's surrender (pp. 65). However, despite these details Walker maintains that the primary reason for why Truman authorized the use of the atomic bombs was the saving of American lives. Any diplomatic benefit in regard to the Soviet Union, he suggests, was simply residual. Even if Walker is correct that the decision was not primarily based on the Soviet factor, he fails to adequately explain American actions that followed the successful testing of the bomb. Why did the United States change its strategy for ending the war to one that made it more difficult for bringing about Japan's surrender? For example, why did the United States refuse to address the question of the Japanese emperor and thus allow an ambiguity to prevail that would naturally delay rather than accelerate the surrender? And why did the United States posture in ways that slowed Soviet entry into the war and only further drag out the ending? Walker also does not adequately explain why Truman thought it essential to drop the second bomb so quickly. Is it wrong to suggest that here is the point where the United States was ending World War II while arrogantly starting the Cold War? "Hiroshima has shaken the whole world," Stalin reportedly said. "The balance has been destroyed" (p. 82). Nagasaki certainly offered him no reassurance.

Prompt and Utter Destruction is recommended for teaching undergraduates, so long as the text is used as a springboard for a full discussion. Walker provides another worthy contribution to an important debate and does not pretend to have issued the last word. He concludes, "The decision to use atomic bombs against Japan was such a momentous event in bringing about the end of World War II and in shaping the postwar world that it should continue to be studied, evaluated, and debated." However, he adds, "The issue of whether the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were sound, proper, and justifiable actions must be approached by fully considering the situation facing American and Japanese leaders in the summer of 1945 and by banishing the myths that have taken hold since then."

Note

The author is the historian of the United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission, but states that his interest in the atomic bombings of Japan are of a personal endeavor and not work related. For an earlier writing, see J. Samuel Walker, "The Decision To Use the Bombs: A Historiographical Update," *Diplomatic History* 14, 1 (Winter 1990): 97-114. Also, Walker appears in the ABC News documentary, "Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped" (1995).

Citation: Roger Chapman. Review of Walker, J. Samuel, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan.* H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3577