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Wilson D. Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. xii, 174. ISBN 978-0-521-51419-4.

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With *The Most Controversial Decision*, Wilson Miscamble¹ (Univ. of Notre Dame) offers another installment in the prolonged, sometimes acrimonious debate over American use of the atomic bomb at the conclusion of the Second World War. In the summer of 1945, US officials were not agonizing about whether to use the bomb; it was simply axiomatic that, when it was ready, the new super weapon would be deployed against any remaining Axis opponents. Beyond sheer bureaucratic momentum for employing the fruits of the Manhattan Project, the war had inured Americans to enemy civilian casualties, particularly Japanese casualties, the result of a pervasive homicidal anger in the wake of Pearl Harbor, the Bataan Death March, and many other well-publicized Japanese atrocities. A postwar public opinion poll found that the overwhelming majority of Americans supported the use of atomic bombs against Japan, while a significant minority wished even more had been dropped.

Only after the war and the unsettling realization of what the dawning nuclear era portended did a few US leaders (for example, General Dwight Eisenhower and Admiral William Leahy) express second thoughts about dropping “Little Boy” and “Fat Man.” In contrast, President Harry Truman and Secretary of State James Byrnes published defenses of their actions, claiming the bombs had to be used to save a million or more American lives that might have been lost in an invasion of the Japanese home islands. This became the position of “orthodox” or “traditionalist” historiography.² Only in the 1960s did a “revisionist” tide roll in, most notably in the work of Gar Alperowitz.³ Revisionists argue that use of the atomic bomb was unnecessary, because Japan was ready to surrender, if only the Allies would modify their unconditional surrender demands and leave the imperial institution and its current incumbent in place—a concession the Truman administration did subsequently grant. America used the bomb, Alperowitz contends, to intimidate its difficult Russian ally in a maneuver of atomic diplomacy. The battle between traditionalists and revisionists has raged ever since, both in academia and in the broader public arena, as evidenced by the uproar over the Smithsonian *Enola Gay* exhibit⁴ and the ABC News documentary, “Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped” (1995).⁵

Miscamble seeks to provide an updated defense of the orthodox position, buttressed by more recently available evidence, which, he believes, undermines the revisionist heresy. He draws heavily on the work of Edward Drea and Richard Frank,⁶ who show that Japanese leaders in 1945 were determined to fight one last climactic battle (Operation Ketsu-Go) against the expected invaders of their homeland. They massively reinforced the island of Kyushu with some 900,000 troops and 8,500 aircraft. Tokyo hoped to inflict enough casualties to force the Americans to lose heart and accept a less punitive, negotiated peace. Drea demonstrates that US leaders, aware of this development through Ultra intercepts, were having second thoughts

1. A Roman Catholic priest, he is also the author of *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2006).

2. See, e.g., Herbert Feis, *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1961).

3. See *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1965) and, for a more exhaustive treatment, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (NY: Knopf, 1995).

4. See Neil A. Lewis, “Smithsonian Substantially Alters Enola Gay Exhibit after Criticism,” *New York Times* (1 Oct 1994) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1405.htm.

5. Accessible at YouTube – www.miwsr.com/rd/1406.htm.

6. Respectively, *MacArthur’s ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War against Japan, 1942–1945* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1992) and *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (NY: Random House, 1999).

about the planned invasion of Kyushu (Operation Olympic). Frank shows that the Japanese army high command refused to accept peace terms that included occupation of the home islands, Allied supervision of war crimes trials, the disarmament of Japan, changes in the existing anti-democratic political system which gave the military veto power over government decisions, or the complete loss of Japan's overseas empire—in short, any terms that were agreeable to the Allies. It was not merely the Truman administration's refusal to guarantee preservation of the imperial throne that blocked the way to a mutually satisfactory peace. In this sense, Miscamble has subtracted an important element from the revisionist interpretation.

According to Miscamble, the unwillingness of Truman and Byrnes to modify their unconditional surrender demand and their readiness to use the A-bomb had much more to do with military necessity and domestic politics than any grand geopolitical strategy regarding the Soviet Union. Byrnes clearly saw that “retreating from unconditional surrender terms might be exploited by the Japanese as a sign of American war weariness and cause a political firestorm among a public that held no love for Japan or its ruler. On the other hand not taking advantage of measures that might bring the war to a speedy end and prevent further American casualties would leave him and Truman vulnerable to harsh criticism. From Byrnes's perspective using the atomic bomb addressed both dangers” (65).

Frank and now Miscamble argue that only the atomic immolation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki finally impelled the weak and irresolute Emperor Hirohito to ignore the objections of his military commanders and make his “sacred decision” to accept a slightly modified version of the Potsdam Declaration peace terms. Here the author's argument is less convincing. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa has maintained, using newly available Japanese documents, that the Soviet entrance into the Pacific War, not the atomic bombs, led Hirohito and his countrymen to “bear the unbearable.”⁷ Similarly, US Navy and Air Force commanders were convinced their blockade and conventional bombing operations were on the verge of forcing the enemy to surrender. Japan, cut off from its rich overseas empire, was running short of fuel, food, and other commodities essential to its war effort.

Would Japan have surrendered even if the United States had not dropped the atomic bombs? If yes, then it may not be true that “Japan most certainly would have fought on considerably longer...” (113). In making this best-case analysis of Operation Ketsu-Go, the author ignores Drea's judgment that the Japanese could not have stopped a determined American invasion, even though they might have inflicted many thousands of casualties on their adversary.⁸ Hirohito himself had concluded that Japan's army lacked the resources to fend off the enemy.

Even if the A-bombs were not used solely to gain leverage against the USSR, as Alperowitz and other revisionists argue, that does not mean there was no atomic diplomacy whatever. Truman clearly contrived to postpone the Potsdam summit until after the successful Alamogordo A-bomb test, a critical fact overlooked by Miscamble, who depicts Truman as a somewhat naïve continuer of President Roosevelt's policies: “Like his predecessor he expected to work in collaboration with the wartime allies in shaping the postwar international structure” (26–27). Where is the Missouri senator who famously said after Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, “If we see that Germany is winning we ought to help Russia and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany, and that way let them kill as many as possible.”⁹ Certainly, US possession of atomic weapons allowed Truman and Secretary Byrnes to stop pleading for Soviet action in the Far East, now seen as altogether undesirable. Some have argued that the second atomic bomb was dropped so soon after the first specifically to force a quick Japanese surrender, thereby precluding the Soviets from seizing Manchuria and Stalin from playing any role in the occupation of Japan.¹⁰ Truman said more than once that the bomb gave him a new sense of confidence, especially in dealing with the Russians.

7. *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2005).

8. *MacArthur's ULTRA* (note 6 above) 218.

9. *NY Times* (24 June 1941).

10. See Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko, *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2008) 88–89.

Moreover, Miscamble's account notwithstanding, the Cold War was not a result of Stalin's misconduct. As Gabriel Gorodetsky has persuasively demonstrated, "The source of the breach between the Allies and the subsequent bilateral confrontation is ... buried deep in relations between the Soviet Union and the West on the eve of the war and particularly during the formative stages of the Grand Alliance."¹¹ Moreover, to assert that Truman departed from Roosevelt's foreign policy only after exhausting all possibilities for cooperation with the USSR¹² is to miss an important point. The Second World War was an ideological crusade, not just for Hitler and Stalin, but also for Americans, who fought for liberal, democratic, capitalist internationalism. Secretary of War Henry Stimson even imagined that atomic technology could be bartered for liberal reforms in the Soviet Union!

Miscamble's views of Stalin and Soviet foreign policy reflect an unreconstructed Cold War orthodoxy: the Soviets bear sole responsibility for starting the Cold War because of their overarching ambitions in Europe and the Far East, while the United States was simply and properly reacting to an aggressive USSR. Such arguments disregard the rich recent historiography on Soviet postwar policy.¹³

Surprisingly, coming from a Catholic priest, the brief chapter on the morality of using atomic bombs is most disappointing. Admitting that the slaughter of innocents is a moral evil, Miscamble yet implicitly justifies such acts by situational ethics as "a necessary evil" (123). Machiavelli trumps Jesus and St. Paul! The ethics of using atomic weapons in an age of mass societies and democracies deserves a more probing and nuanced examination.

As a partially successful attempt to adduce new documentary evidence for their position, *The Most Controversial Decision* will please the orthodox faithful, but will not cause revisionists to throw up their hands in surrender. We cannot know whether the devastation by conventional bombing and the privations of the naval blockade combined with the massive assault by the Red army would have brought a Japanese capitulation even without the A-bombs. No rehashing of the old Cold War dichotomy of Russian aggression and American righteous reaction can any longer be persuasive. Recently a "middle ground" position has begun to emerge among scholars¹⁴ who deny that Japan was ready to surrender on acceptable terms in the summer of 1945, but also see the atomic bomb as a major component of American geopolitical strategy from the very beginning of the nuclear age.

11. "The Origins of the Cold War: Stalin, Churchill and the Formation of the Grand Alliance," *Russian Review* 47 (1988) 170.

12. This is argued more fully in *From Roosevelt to Truman* (note 1 above).

13. See, e.g., Gorodetsky (note 11 above), Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2007), and Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2007).

14. See, esp., J. Samuel Walker, "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground," *Diplomatic History* 29 (2005) 311-34, and *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2004).