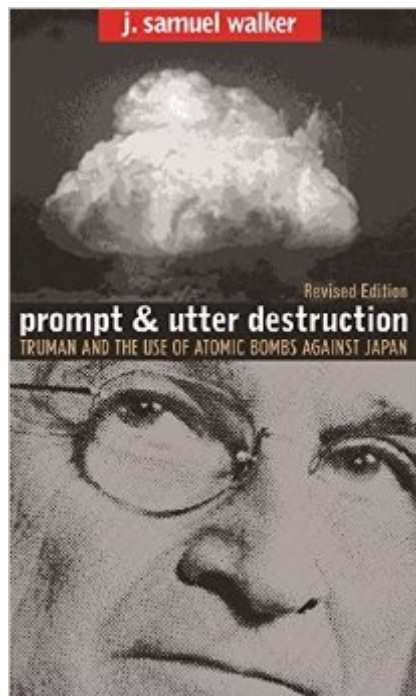


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Prompt And Utter Destruction: Truman And The Use Of Atomic Bombs Against Japan, Revised Edition



Synopsis

In this concise account of why America used atomic bombs against Japan in 1945, J. Samuel Walker analyzes the reasons behind President Truman's most controversial decision. Delineating what was known and not known by American leaders at the time, Walker evaluates the roles of U.S.-Soviet relations and of American domestic politics. In this new edition, Walker takes into account recent scholarship on the topic, including new information on the Japanese decision to surrender. He has also revised the book to place more emphasis on the effect of the Soviet invasion of Manchuria in convincing the emperor and his advisers to quit the war. Rising above an often polemical debate, Walker presents an accessible synthesis of previous work and an important, original contribution to our understanding of the events that ushered in the atomic age.

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Customer Reviews

One of the most complex, divisive, and nuanced debates in the history of the twentieth century is the decision by U.S. President Harry S. Truman in August 1945 to drop two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, thereby ending World War II. A traditional conception of the decision, indeed the one most often voiced by actors in the decision, was that it was done to speed the end of the war and thereby preserve American lives that might be lost in future combat. The revisionist interpretation, often identified with Gar Alperowitz, argues that the war was almost over and that the Japanese were on the verge of surrender anyway. The reason to drop the bomb, therefore, had little to do with the ending of World War II and was aimed more at impressing and

influencing future relations with the Soviet Union. Another interpretation suggests that the use of the atomic bomb had more to do with American racism, and that the U.S. would have refrained from using such a horrific weapon on other Caucasians in Europe. Other scholars condemn the use of such a weapon targeting large populations, including non-combatants, as immoral and obscene. Subsequent historians have argued various permutations of these interpretations and the debate remains far from settled. J. Samuel Walker's "'prompt & utter destruction': Truman and the Use of the Atomic Bomb against Japan" is a superb short discussion of the merits of each of these interpretations and an assessment of the current state of understanding on the subject. He takes an exceptionally even-handed approach, pointing up the strengths and weaknesses of each major argument and assessing how they have evolved over time. In the end, as Walker documents, five fundamental considerations played into the decision to use atomic bombs in August 1945.

This book is an important contribution to the ongoing (and seemingly never-ending) debate on the reasons why the U.S. chose to drop two atomic bombs on Japan. The author took it upon himself to clearly determine whether the bomb was militarily necessary - as has been suggested by many U.S. historians writing before J. Samuel Walker - or whether it might have been used for purely political reasons such as intimidating the Soviet Union. The results he comes up with are in many ways quite remarkable. For instance it becomes evident that then president Harry S. Truman was never confronted with the categorical choice between using the bomb and invading the Japanese main islands (which might have involved heavy U.S. losses). Indeed, by the beginning of summer 1945 Japan was believed to be so weak that the war was expected to come to an end before an invasion began, and even if it had been necessary to proceed with an invasion, the resulting casualties were supposed to be much fewer than Truman and his top-level advisers claimed after the war. However, Walker demonstrates rather convincingly that whichever alternatives might have existed, the bomb nevertheless proved to be the best means to win a decisive victory at the lowest cost in American casualties. Taking into account the element of time, one begins to understand how great the temptation must have been for Truman and his cabinet to drop the bombs and thereby finish the war with a clean stroke. Although other reasons, too, played an important part in the ultimate decision, the finding that using the bomb simply provided the president and his advisers with the most convenient measure to end the war is a compelling one and without doubt the book's most valuable message.

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