Anniversary of the Lifesaver Bomb

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Ever since the Smithsonian Institution earlier this year tried to give us all a guilty conscience about the B-29 named Enola Gay, we've been inundated with a torrent of breastbeating about the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima. The 50th anniversary of August 6, 1945 is supposed to make us all hang our heads in shame.

Newsweek accompanied pages of ugly pictures with a poll reporting that Americans now think dropping the bomb on Japan was "wrong." But the poll demographics tell a different story. The senior citizens whose lives were on the line in World War II approve of the bombing, while the younger generations that don't remember World War II have the luxury of sanctimonious second-guessing.

For the men who fought World War II, the atom bomb was a lifesaver in every meaning of the word. Dropping the bomb on Hiroshima meant the difference between life and death to hundreds of thousands of our best and brightest young men.

Dropping the atom bomb on Hiroshima meant that those fine young American men could come home, grow up to live normal lives, marry and raise families, instead of dying a tortured death 5,000 miles away. The lucky ones would have identifiable graves.

What the Hiroshima bomb accomplished was to preempt General George Marshall's horrendous plan to defeat Japan: an island-by-island invasion at a projected cost of a half million American deaths.

The first phase, called Operation Olympic, would have sent 650,000 American servicemen starting November 1, 1945 to try to capture the island of Kyushu. It would have been a slaughter because the Japanese were prepared to defend Kyushu with 540,000 troops and 5,000 kamikaze planes.

The follow-up invasion, called Operation Coronet, was scheduled to start the drive toward Tokyo on March 1, 1946. U.S. plans projected an invasion force of two million men.

Marshall couldn't have had any illusions about the hideous human cost of such an island-by-island invasion. Iwo Jima had given us a preview.

On February 19, 1945, 30,000 Marines landed on that little five- mile island, and five days later planted the U.S. flag, an event immortalized in the most famous war photograph in history. When the Iwo Jima battle ended a month later, the price we had paid for raising our flag was 26,000 casualties including more than 6,800 dead (including three of the six men in the photograph).

Japanese soldiers were tough fighters. Under orders not to be captured alive, only 1,000 were taken prisoner while 22,000 died defending Iwo Jima.

With those kinds of casualty figures, only a reckless disregard of American lives could cause a U.S. leader to send American troops to invade Japanese home islands. But that was the Marshall plan, even though he knew from the coded messages we had intercepted that Japan planned to defend its home islands with 2.3 million troops, another four million Army and Navy employees, and an armed militia of 28 million, all sworn to fight to the death.

Admiral William D. Leahy, Truman's military adviser, predicted that 30 to 35 percent of U.S. soldiers would be killed or wounded during the first 30 days of an invasion of Japan. The Hiroshima bomb saved those lives, as well as those of about 400,000 Allied prisoners of war and civilian detainees held by the Japanese, whom Japan had planned to execute in the event of an American invasion.

President Harry (the buck stops here) Truman didn't have any difficulty making the atom bomb decision, and he shouldn't have. He told reporters in 1947 that "I didn't have any doubts at the time" because the decision saved 250,000 to 500,000 American lives.

"I'd do it again," Truman said in 1956. In 1962, he added, "I knew I'd done the right thing."

Nor did other Americans at the time have any qualms about the loss of life in the country that had started the war with a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. Newsweek, for example, cheered the fact that "perhaps one

million persons were made homeless" by our firebombing of Tokyo.

The argument is made today that we should not have dropped the bomb because "Japan was already seeking to surrender." In an interview with veteran journalist Philip Clarke in 1962, Truman answered, "The bombs were dropped after Japan had been warned that we had discovered the greatest explosive in the history of the world and then we asked them to surrender. They did not do it."

Japan didn't even surrender after the Hiroshima bomb was dropped. It took the second atom bomb at Nagasaki, three days later, to induce Japan to surrender.

Instead of being haunted by the ghosts of Hiroshima, Americans today should remember the American heroes of Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, Midway, and Okinawa, and rejoice that the survivors of those bloody battles lived to come home to America instead of being killed on the beaches of Japan.