

generals then decided to ask Churchill to put these arguments to Harry Truman, who had become US President after Roosevelt's death in April. (State Dept: <https://bit.ly/CCS-Potsdam-16-July-1945>)

Churchill did what the generals asked and put at least some of these arguments to Truman two days later, in a private meeting on 18 July.

First, Churchill talked to Truman about a recent Japanese peace move. Then, he suggested it would save lives if the emperor was spared: 'I dwelt upon the tremendous cost in American life and, to a smaller extent, in British life which would be involved in forcing "unconditional surrender" upon the Japanese. It was for him to consider whether this might not be expressed in some other way, so that we got all the essentials for future peace and security, and yet left the Japanese some show of saving their military honour and some assurance of their national existence.'

Churchill pointed out to Truman that the Japanese 'had something for which they were ready to face certain death in very large numbers, and this might not be so important to us as to them'. (From the official British government history of the Second World War: John Ehrman, *Grand Strategy* volume VI, p303; <https://bit.ly/Churchill-18-July>)

Truman decided instead to drop the Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki *before* sparing the emperor (which he eventually did, as part of the Japanese surrender) and *before* Russia was due to declare war. If he had taken Churchill's advice in mid-July, the Japanese might have surrendered before Truman could drop the Bomb and before he could show the world the new power that only the US possessed.

*After Nagasaki*, Churchill claimed that the atomic bombings had been necessary to avoid a long, bloody conquest of Japan.

*Before Hiroshima*, though, Britain's wartime leader argued repeatedly for two non-atomic methods for achieving a quick Japanese surrender, two options that Churchill clearly believed would be effective, especially if tried in combination.

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# Even Churchill Thought Hiroshima Was Unnecessary

On 6 August 1945, the US destroyed the Japanese city of Hiroshima with an atomic bomb. Three days later, Nagasaki was wiped out. The two nuclear bombs killed over 100,000 men, women and children.

It was said that using the Bomb was the only way to avoid a long, drawn-out land invasion of Japan costing tens of thousands of lives.

This was not true. In mid-1945, there were two other possible ways of ending the war quickly, without using the Bomb or invading Japan.

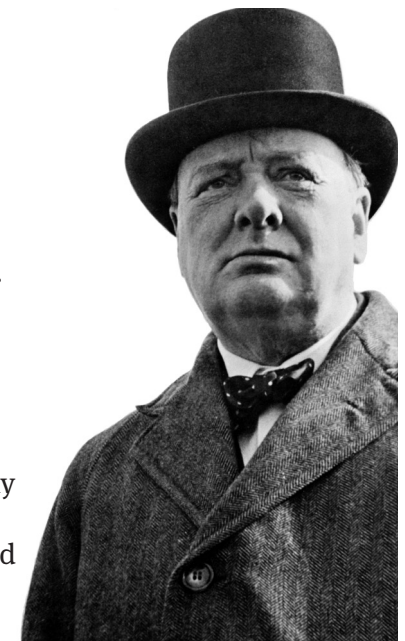
In July 1945, Britain's wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, believed that these two non-nuclear options had a very good chance of persuading Japan to surrender.

## 1) The Russian Card

One option that Churchill believed in (from September 1944 onwards) was a Soviet declaration of war against Japan.

The Soviet Union was not at war with Japan in 1944 because the two had agreed a five-year truce in April 1941.

Despite the fact that this neutrality pact was not due to run out until April 1946, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin secretly promised the US and Britain at the Tehran Conference in 1943 that he would declare war on Japan early – but only after Germany had been defeated.



Winston Churchill, 1942. PHOTO: VIA LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

On 27 September 1944, Churchill cabled Stalin that he ‘most earnestly desire[d]’ a Soviet declaration of war: ‘The opening of a Russian military front against the Japanese would force them to burn and bleed, especially in the air, in a manner which would vastly accelerate their defeat. From all I have learned about the internal state of Japan and the sense of hopelessness weighing on their people, I believe it might well be that once the Nazis are shattered a triple summons to Japan to surrender, coming from our three Great Powers, might be decisive.’ (Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy*, p215; <http://bit.ly/Churchill-Stalin-triple-summons>)

## 2) The Emperor Amnesty

Churchill also believed that the Allies could bring about a Japanese surrender if they softened their demand for ‘unconditional surrender’, and publicly guaranteed that the Japanese emperor, Hirohito, could remain on the throne as a constitutional monarch after the war.

When the US first demanded ‘unconditional surrender’ in 1943, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had promised ‘punishment and retribution in full’ against the ‘guilty, barbaric leaders’ of Germany, Italy *and* Japan. It seemed that the emperor, worshipped like a god in Japan, would be dethroned and executed after the war.

In February 1945, Churchill met with President Roosevelt and the Combined Chiefs of Staff (the British and US military leaderships) at the Yalta Conference.

Churchill again called for Russia to be asked to declare war on Japan. Churchill then added, according to declassified US State Department records: ‘Japan might ask in these circumstances what mitigation [softening] of the full rigour of unconditional surrender would be extended to her if she accepted the ultimatum.’ He was referring to the possibility of sparing the emperor.

Churchill said: ‘there was no doubt that some mitigation would be worth while if it led to the saving of a year or a year and a half of a war in which so much blood and treasure would be poured out.’ (State Department minutes: <http://bit.ly/Churchill-four-power-ultimatum>)

In other words, Churchill believed that if the Allies publicly promised to spare the emperor, particularly if Russia had just declared war, Japan would surrender, saving a year or more of war.

That was what Churchill believed in February 1945, five months

before the US carried out the world’s first nuclear test and the atom bomb went from being science fiction to grim military fact.

## The Generals agree with Churchill

Almost every civilian and military official in the US government, including the Secretary of War and the acting Secretary of State (in charge of foreign policy), asked Truman to publicly spare the emperor, in order to shorten the war and to save US soldiers’ lives. (See Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use The Atomic Bomb*, Fontana Press, 1995.)

The US military leadership even teamed up with the British military to try to get this policy change. On 16 July 1945, early on at the Potsdam Conference in conquered Germany, there was a meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff (the US and British military leaderships).

According to the declassified minutes of the meeting, the head of the British military, General Sir Alan Brooke, said that ‘[f]rom the military point of view’, the British armed forces believed there might be ‘some advantage’ in presenting a softer interpretation of the phrase ‘unconditional surrender’ to the Japanese.

If it ‘did not involve the dissolution of the Imperial institution, the Emperor would be in a position to order the cease-fire in outlying areas whereas, if the dynasty were destroyed, the outlying garrisons might continue to fight for many months or years.’ (State Dept document: <https://bit.ly/CCS-Potsdam-16-July-1945>)

US military leaders agreed with the British. They suggested that the ‘correct psychological moment’ for clarifying ‘unconditional surrender’ in this way might be ‘on Russian entry into the war’.

In other words, US and British military leaders wanted to combine a Russian declaration of war and ‘sparing the emperor’ into one big surrender shock – exactly what Churchill had argued for, five months earlier, at Yalta.

US historian Gar Alperovitz points out that US and British military leaders believed three things about the role of the emperor at this time: (1) Japan was unlikely to surrender if the position of the emperor was under threat. (2) Promising to spare the emperor could help to produce a Japanese surrender. (3) Without a surrender order from Hirohito, Japanese forces across Asia might well continue to fight, making for a much longer war.

Getting back to the 16 July Potsdam meeting, the US and British