

Atomic Bombs and the Early Cold War

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U.S. President Barack Obama's recent visit to Hiroshima offers an opportunity to reconsider some of the myths surrounding the historic decision to use the atomic bomb. A good place to start is with an unusual and little-noticed display at The National Museum of the United States Navy in Washington. A plaque explaining an exhibit devoted to the atomic bombings declares: "The vast destruction wreaked by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the loss of 135,000 people made little impact on the Japanese military. However, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria on 9 August — fulfilling a promise made at the Yalta Conference in February — changed their minds."

Though the surprising statement runs contrary to the [accepted](#) claim that the atomic bombs ended World War II, it is faithful to the historical record of how and why Japan surrendered. The Japanese cabinet — and especially the Japanese army leaders — were not, in fact, jolted into surrender by the bombings. Japan had been willing to sacrifice city after city to American conventional bombing in the months leading up to Hiroshima — most dramatically in the March 9 [firebombing](#) of Tokyo, an attack that cost an estimated 100,000 lives.



What Japan's military leaders were [focused](#) on was the Red Army, which was poised to take on the best of Japan's remaining army in Manchuria. The historical record also makes clear that American leaders fully understood this. Indeed, before the atomic bomb was successfully tested, U.S. leaders desperately sought assurances that the Red Army would attack Japan after Germany was defeated. The president was strongly advised that when this happened, Japan was likely to surrender with the sole proviso that Japan be allowed to keep its emperor in some figurehead role.

Nor was this deemed a major problem. The U.S. military had long planned to keep the emperor in such a role to help control Japan during the postwar occupation. Once the atomic bomb was successfully tested, however, assurances for the emperor that were included in the 1945 [Proclamation Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender](#) were eliminated, making it certain Japan would continue to fight. As the Navy museum plaque also accurately explains: "Truman's political advisors overrode the views of the military leaders and foreign policy makers, insisting that Americans would not accept leniency towards the emperor."

Although it goes on to suggest this was done for political, not military reasons, there are unresolved questions about this judgment. The fact is the historical record also shows that Republican leaders in the United States Senate and elsewhere at that time were urging the president to provide assurances for the emperor precisely because they too judged that this would end the war.



The Joint Chiefs of Staff felt so strongly about the matter that they undertook what we would now call an "end run" to try to put assurances back into the proclamation. They asked British military leaders to ask Prime Minister Winston Churchill to try to persuade U.S. President Harry Truman to include the emperor paragraph in the proclamation — and in turn Churchill attempted to get Truman to do so. But to no avail.

Ultimately, of course, the United States allowed Japan to keep its emperor as a way to help control Japan during the occupation — but only after, not before, the bombs were used. Japan still has a figurehead, powerless emperor to this day.

The unusual pattern of events — with the combined U.S. military leadership strongly urging a course of action deemed likely to save lives, and the president resisting — has, of course, raised questions in the minds of many as to whether other issues were involved.

The most obvious alternative explanation was put forward by early postwar critics who pointed out that there is considerable evidence that diplomatic reasons concerning the Soviet Union — not military reasons concerning Japan — may have been important. For instance, after a group of nuclear scientists met with Truman's chief adviser on the atomic bomb, U.S. Secretary of State James Byrnes, one reported that, "Mr. Byrnes did not argue that it was necessary to use the bomb against the cities of Japan in order to win the war [...] Mr. Byrnes' [...] view [was] that our possessing and demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable."



U.S. Secretary of War Henry Stimson's [diary](#) also includes many passages like the following: "[I]t may be necessary to have it out with Russia on her relations to Manchuria and Port Arthur and various other parts of North China, and also the relations of China to us. Over any such tangled weave of problems the [atomic bomb] secret would be dominant." He continues: "We have coming into action a weapon which will be unique. [...] Let our actions speak for themselves."

Close attention to some key dates is also instructive. The Soviet Union was expected to enter the Japanese war three months after Germany surrendered on May 8 — which would have put the Red Army attack on or around Aug. 8. Hiroshima was destroyed on Aug. 6 and Nagasaki on Aug. 9.

That diplomatic considerations may have been at the heart of the decision to postpone the planned assurances for the emperor from the proclamation until after the bomb was used can hardly be proved. What can be [proved](#) is that the president was advised that the assurances were, in fact, likely to end the war without the bombs and long before a first landing on the southernmost of the Japanese main islands — not to mention a full invasion — could take place. So there was plenty time to use the bombs if Japan did not surrender once assurances for the emperor were given.

The Navy museum plaque is not the only evidence that some of the nation's most important military leaders had grave misgivings about



using the atomic bombs against the largely civilian targets of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For instance, the president's chief of staff — William Leahy, a five-star admiral who presided over meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — declared in his 1950 [memoir](#): "It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender. [...] My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children."

Similarly, the five-star general who oversaw America's military victory in World War II and later became president, Dwight Eisenhower, [declared](#) publicly in 1963 that, "it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing." In his [memoirs](#) Eisenhower recalled that when he was informed by Stimson that the atomic bomb was about to be used: "I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and second because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives."

A few weeks after the bombing, U.S. Major General Curtis LeMay, the famous "hawk" who led the 21st Bomber Command, an air force unit that was involved in many bombing operations against Japan, [stated](#) publicly: "The war would have been over in two weeks without the Russians



entering and without the atomic bomb. [...] [T]he atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all."

And a May 29, 1945 [memorandum](#) written by U.S. Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy shows that America's top military leader, U.S. General George Marshall "thought these weapons might first be used against straight military objectives such as a large naval installation and then if no complete result was derived from the effect of that, he thought we ought to designate a number of large manufacturing areas from which the people would be warned to leave — telling the Japanese that we intend to destroy such centers."

What really happened in the days leading up to the decision to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki may never be known. Enough is known, however, to underscore a critical lesson for the future: Human beings in general, and political leaders in particular, are all too commonly prone to making decisions that put near-term political concerns above truly fundamental humanitarian concerns.

The only serious answer to the threat of nuclear weapons is an all-out effort to abolish them from arsenals throughout the world — an answer that President Obama has reaffirmed during his historic visit to Hiroshima.

Gar Alperovitz is the author of two major studies of the atomic bombings: "[Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam](#)" and "[The Decision to Use](#)



[the Atomic Bomb](#)," where references to the key documentary sources in this piece can also be found.

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