

The Winning Weapon?

Ward Wilson

Rethinking Nuclear Weapons in Light of Hiroshima

Did the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki force the Japanese to surrender in 1945? Did nuclear weapons, in effect, win the war in the Pacific? These questions matter because almost all thinking about nuclear war and nuclear weapons depends, in one way or another, on judgments about the effect of these attacks.

Scholarship about Japan's decision to surrender can be divided into three phases. During the first twenty years after Hiroshima, historians and strategists rarely questioned the necessity of using the atomic bomb or the decisive role it played in bringing World War II to a close.¹ In 1965, however, a revisionist school began examining the decision to use the bomb more closely, raising moral questions about the use of nuclear weapons and asking probing questions about the motives of U.S. leaders. They continued to believe, however, that the bomb was instrumental in ending the war.² Since 1990 new scholar-

Ward Wilson is an independent scholar who lives in Trenton, New Jersey, and writes regularly at <http://www.rethinkingnuclearweapons.org>.

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1. For traditional interpretations that accept that the bomb was an important part of the Japanese decision to surrender, see Robert J.C. Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1954); Len Giovannitti and Fred Freed, *The Decision to Drop the Bomb* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1965); Herbert Feis, *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966); Leon V. Sigal, *Fighting to a Finish: The Politics of War Termination in the U.S. and Japan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); Robert James Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995); J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Robert P. Newman, *Enola Gay and the Court of History* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); and Barton J. Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (January/February 1995), pp. 135–152. For the first suggestion that the Soviet intervention caused the Japanese to surrender, see Ernest R. May, "The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Far Eastern War, 1941–1945," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (May 1955), pp. 153–174.

2. For revisionist views that agree with the bomb's decisiveness but dispute its necessity, see Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam; The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power* (New York: Vintage, 1965); Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Vintage, 1996); Murray Sayle, "Did the Bomb End the War?" *New Yorker*, July 31, 1995, p. 53; Gar Alperovitz, "Hiroshima: Historians Reassess," *Foreign Policy*, No. 99 (Summer 1995), pp. 15–34; and Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz, eds., *Hiroshima's Shadow: Writings on*

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ship, including recently declassified documents and extensive research into Japanese, Soviet, and U.S. archives, has led to new interpretations of Japan's surrender. New questions have been raised about the centrality of nuclear weapons in coercing Japan to end the war. In particular, analysis of the strategic situation from a Japanese perspective has led some scholars to assert that the Soviet Union's entry into the Pacific war may have been as important or even more important in coercing Japan's leaders.³

To date, this new research has mostly been used to support various positions in the debate on the morality of using nuclear weapons. This article, however, is not concerned with whether the U.S. decision to use nuclear weapons was justified under the circumstances or with more general moral questions about using nuclear weapons. It asks a question with considerably more contemporary significance: Were nuclear weapons militarily effective? Is it possible that the Soviet intervention alone coerced the Japanese and that nuclear weapons had no effect on their decision?

In the summer of 1945, Japan's leaders had two strategies for negotiating an end to World War II: to convince the Soviets (neutral at the time) to mediate, or to fight one last decisive battle that would inflict so many casualties that the United States would agree to more lenient terms. Both plans could still have succeeded after the bombing of Hiroshima; neither plan was possible once the Soviets invaded. From the Japanese perspective, the Soviet invasion

the Denial of History and the Smithsonian Controversy (Stony Creek, Conn.: Pamphleteer's Press, 1996).

3. For new research that first began to question the role of the bomb and to emphasize the role of the Soviet Union (to a greater or lesser extent), see John W. Dower, *Japan in War and Peace: Selected Essays* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); Robert A. Pape, "Why Japan Surrendered," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 154–201; Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Sadao Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender: A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (November 1998), pp. 477–512; Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Random House, 1999); Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); Forrest E. Morgan, *Compellence and the Strategic Culture of Imperial Japan: Implications for Coercive Diplomacy in the Twenty-first Century* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003); and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). For a fascinating, in-depth discussion, see also the H-Diplo roundtable discussion on Hasegawa's *Racing the Enemy*, in Thomas Maddux, ed., "H-Diplo Roundtable, *Racing the Enemy*, Roundtable Editor's Introduction," <http://www.h-net.org/?diplo/roundtables/PDF/Maddux-HasegawaRoundtable.pdf>. A particularly detailed and useful summary of recent scholarship that also contains reproductions of many primary source documents appears in William Burr, ed., "The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II: A Collection of Primary Sources," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 162, National Security Archive, August 5, 2005, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/index.htm>.

of Manchuria and other Japanese-held territory was the event that dramatically changed the strategic landscape and left Japan with no option but to surrender unconditionally. The Hiroshima bombing was simply an extension of an already fierce bombing campaign.

Once they had surrendered, Japan's leaders had strong reasons for misleading their people (and historians) about the role the atomic bomb played in their decision. Who could blame them, after all, if they had lost the war not because they were not brave enough or smart enough, but because they failed to anticipate an unimaginable scientific breakthrough? Similarly, the United States had considerations of national prestige of its own that made the belief that the bomb was decisively congenial.

If nuclear weapons, in their only battlefield use, were not militarily effective, where does that leave the large body of thought about nuclear weapons and nuclear war—much of which is extrapolated from this single case? Is it possible that the prevailing assessment of the power and importance of nuclear weapons is exaggerated?

This article begins by examining Japan's options in the summer of 1945 and the impact the Soviet intervention had on that strategic situation. It then looks at the circumstances surrounding the Hiroshima bombing and tries to determine whether it would have been difficult to perceive important differences between that nuclear attack and the conventional attacks that were also going on that summer. The reactions of various high-level Japanese officials to the Hiroshima bombing are then compared to and contrasted with their reaction to the Soviet intervention. After exploring the national interests that may have affected the truth of the accounts told by various actors in this drama, the article closes by trying to evaluate the importance of reinterpreting the reasons for Japan's surrender.

Negotiating Strategies

In the spring of 1945, Japan was already largely defeated and Japan's leaders knew it. They hoped, however, to win better terms than simple surrender through diplomacy or battle. Research in the last twenty years has made clear that these were the only two options: Japan's ruling elite believed that no other plan for securing an acceptable surrender merited attention or effort.

The "peace" faction, led by Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo (and including Navy Minister Mitsumasa Yonai, Lord Privy Seal Koichi Kido, and many civilian ministers), hoped that diplomacy could provide a solution to Japan's pre-

dicament.⁴ They believed an attempt should be made to persuade the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, to mediate a settlement between Japan, on the one hand, and the United States, Great Britain, and their allies, on the other. The Soviets and the Japanese had signed a neutrality pact in 1941 (motivated on the Soviet side by the need to draw forces from its Asian theater to defend Moscow), which would not expire until April 1946. The Japanese judged that only the Soviets had sufficient status as a great power to mediate between themselves and the United States, and they believed it would be possible through mediation to preserve their form of government (a consensus-based military oligarchy with a divine emperor) and at least some of their conquered territory.

Historians often treat this diplomatic effort by Japanese officials as inexplicable and unrealistic. Japanese leaders knew that this option did not have a high probability of success. They were aware that the Soviets would be predisposed to join the United States and Great Britain in attacking Japan. But they were also aware of tensions that had developed between the Soviet Union and its allies, and they were willing to offer considerable territorial concessions to the Soviets in Asia. They were unaware, of course, that Stalin had already been persuaded by President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill to join the war against Japan. In some ways, the choice of the Soviets was rather clever: it would be in the Soviets' interest, after all, to make sure that the United States did not gain too much from a peace settlement, because any increase in U.S. influence in Asia would mean a corresponding loss of Soviet influence.

The "hard-liners," led by Minister of War Korechika Anami (and including Army Chief of Staff Yoshijiro Umezu and Navy Chief of Staff Soemu Toyoda), believed that a military solution to Japan's crisis could be found. Even though the Japanese military had suffered a series of costly defeats—their economy had been crippled and their navy incapacitated—Japan still had many soldiers willing to fight. One last-ditch battle, the hard-liners felt, could generate better surrender terms.⁵ The hard-liners' plan is also often characterized as wrong-

4. "Peace" faction is a consistently employed misnomer. It suggests a fundamental disagreement over ends—war or peace. But Japan's leaders were largely united in their goal (bringing the war to a close); they were divided only over the best means to achieve that end (diplomacy or battle).

5. Interestingly, both the diplomatic and the military approaches were based on Japanese historical experience. Historians generally believe that the experience of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 set the stage in many ways for Japan's plans and attitudes in World War II. The Russo-Japanese War consisted of a series of relatively inconclusive land campaigns in which casualties were high, followed by a decisive naval battle at Tsushima Strait, which the Japanese dramatically won and which persuaded the Russians to seek an end to the war. This sequence of events is the clear model

headed and fanatic. Seen through the lens of a warrior culture and Japan's experience in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War, however, their behavior may have been desperate, but it was not irrational.⁶ And the astuteness of the Japanese plan to use U.S. casualties as leverage is ratified by the U.S. high command's repeatedly expressed concerns about the possibility of high casualties during an invasion.⁷ The hard-liners correctly identified their opponent's weakness. Whether their hope that they could leverage better terms in this way was realistic seems doubtful, but cannot be known.

Historians generally agree that the Soviet intervention ended Japanese hopes for mediation, but they discuss less often the impact of the Soviet intervention on the strategic military situation. The Soviet force in Manchuria consisted of 1.5 million men; they had a 5 to 1 superiority in tanks and made rapid progress.⁸ An effective defense against an invasion of the home islands from the north would have been difficult because Japanese forces had been steadily shifted south toward the island of Kyushu—the likely first target of a U.S. invasion. The Japanese Fifth Area Army, for example, charged with defending the northern island of Hokkaido, was under strength (at two divisions and one brigade) and was dug in on the east side of the island. Soviet plans called for the 100,000 troops of the Sixteenth Army, after quickly securing the southern half of Sakhalin Island, to launch an immediate invasion of Hokkaido from the west. The difficulties of fighting a decisive battle on two fronts at once would have been clear.⁹

for the “decisive” battle that Japan's military leaders sought throughout World War II. Mediation follows the model of the Russo-Japanese War as well, which was settled through the mediation of U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. The war of 1904–05 also began with a Japanese surprise attack against its opponent's navy. For more on a “decisive” battle, see Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor*, especially chap. 12.

6. Morgan, *Compellence and the Strategic Culture of Imperial Japan*; see especially chap. 6.

7. Richard B. Frank argues that the planned invasion would have been canceled: “With the Navy's withdrawal of support, the terrible casualties in Okinawa, and the appalling radio-intelligence picture of the Japanese buildup on Kyushu, Olympic was not going forward as planned and authorized—period.” Frank, “Why Truman Dropped the Bomb,” *Weekly Standard*, August 8, 2005, pp. 20–24.

8. In some cases, units halted only when they ran out of fuel.

9. Frank, in the H-Diplo roundtable discussion on Hasegawa's *Racing the Enemy*, argues that Japan's leaders would have discounted the Soviet invasion both because they had already written off Manchuria and because the Soviets' paucity of amphibious landing craft made the possibility of an invasion of the Home Islands far less threatening than the sheer number of Soviet troops makes it appear. Accepting his point requires disbelieving a number of contemporaneous Japanese statements. It is possible the Japanese high command had secretly written off Manchuria, although the evidence is ambiguous. On the landing craft, however, the United States had a history of supplying crucial war material to the Soviets. Even presuming that the Japanese had accurate esti-

Both plans for obtaining better terms—diplomatic and military—had a low probability of success, but each had some merit. Whether either plan was ultimately realistic is beside the point; the Japanese leadership believed that these were the only two options that offered any hope of securing better terms. Efforts on behalf of both options were being actively pursued at the end of July and in the first week of August 1945. When the Soviet Union intervened in the early hours of August 9, however, both of these options were invalidated. The Soviets could not serve as mediators if they were belligerents in the conflict; and although hard-liners might have been able to convince themselves that an all-out effort against one invasion was possible, no one would have believed that a decisive battle could be fought against two opponents at the same time. At a single stroke, all of the viable options for securing better surrender terms were eliminated.¹⁰

City Bombing

Although the atomic bombing of Hiroshima is generally presented as a horrifying event, whether Japanese leaders would have considered it appreciably different from other (conventional) attacks carried out that summer is unclear. The conventional attacks launched by U.S. bombers against Japan in the spring and summer of 1945 were almost as large as the Hiroshima bombing; they often caused more damage (and once caused more casualties); and given that sixty-six other Japanese cities were also attacked that summer, it may have been hard to differentiate the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.

From the U.S. perspective, the atomic bomb was clearly different. The United States had spent \$2 billion building it, had dedicated the work of hundreds of their best scientists to it, and even before it was tested, had invested it with a sense of looming power. (On Harry Truman's second day as president, James Byrnes [soon to be Truman's secretary of state] told him, "in quiet tones which did not disguise his feeling of awe, that the explosive emerging from American laboratories and plants might be powerful enough to destroy the

mates of the numbers of Soviet landing craft, and that they had confidence in those estimates, prudence would still have dictated that Japanese leaders assume that the United States would supply its allies with the necessary ships.

10. I wrote this passage about the Soviet intervention's impact on Japan's strategic situation before reading the very similar construction (written two years earlier) in the H-Diplo roundtable discussion on *Racing the Enemy* by David Holloway. Given the soundness of Holloway's historical judgment and the clarity of his thought, the fact that his earlier appreciation of the situation agrees with the one presented here reinforces my belief that it is the right one.

whole world.”)¹¹ U.S. historians often assume that the Japanese attitude toward the atomic bomb was largely like the U.S. attitude, but the evidence does not support this assumption.

First, the scale of the atomic bomb was not radically different. A single B-29 bomber flying from U.S. bases in the Mariana Islands could, depending on the distance to the target city (as well as weather, attack altitude, and other factors), carry 8,000 to 10,000 pounds of bombs. A typical raid of 500 bombers, therefore, could deliver 4 to 5 kilotons of bombs to their targets.¹² Since the Hiroshima bomb was the equivalent of 16 kilotons of TNT, the attack on Hiroshima was only three to four times as powerful as a typical conventional raid that summer. Further, because much of the explosive force in a single large explosion is concentrated at the very center, whereas the explosive force of thousands of bombs would be more evenly distributed, the net effective force of the two is less different than it might at first appear.

Second, beginning in March 1945, U.S. bombers had conducted a campaign of air attacks against Japanese cities that killed more than 330,000 civilians and wounded 472,000, made more than 8 million homeless, and burned more than 177 square miles of urban area.¹³ The extent of the campaign may be gauged by the size of some of the “cities” being attacked: so many Japanese cities had been destroyed that U.S. military planners were directing attacks toward communities with as few as 30,000 people. In most developed countries, these would be called large towns, not cities. Using this criteria, for example, the current student body of the University of Wisconsin—without the citizens of Madison—would qualify.¹⁴

Third, all summer long Japanese cities had been bombed at an average rate of one every other day. In the three-week period prior to the Hiroshima bombing, twenty-five cities were attacked (see Figure 1). Of these, eight, or nearly one-third, suffered greater damage than Hiroshima. (None had as many casualties as Hiroshima.)¹⁵ From the viewpoint of one of the Japanese leaders on

11. Feis, *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*, p. 36.

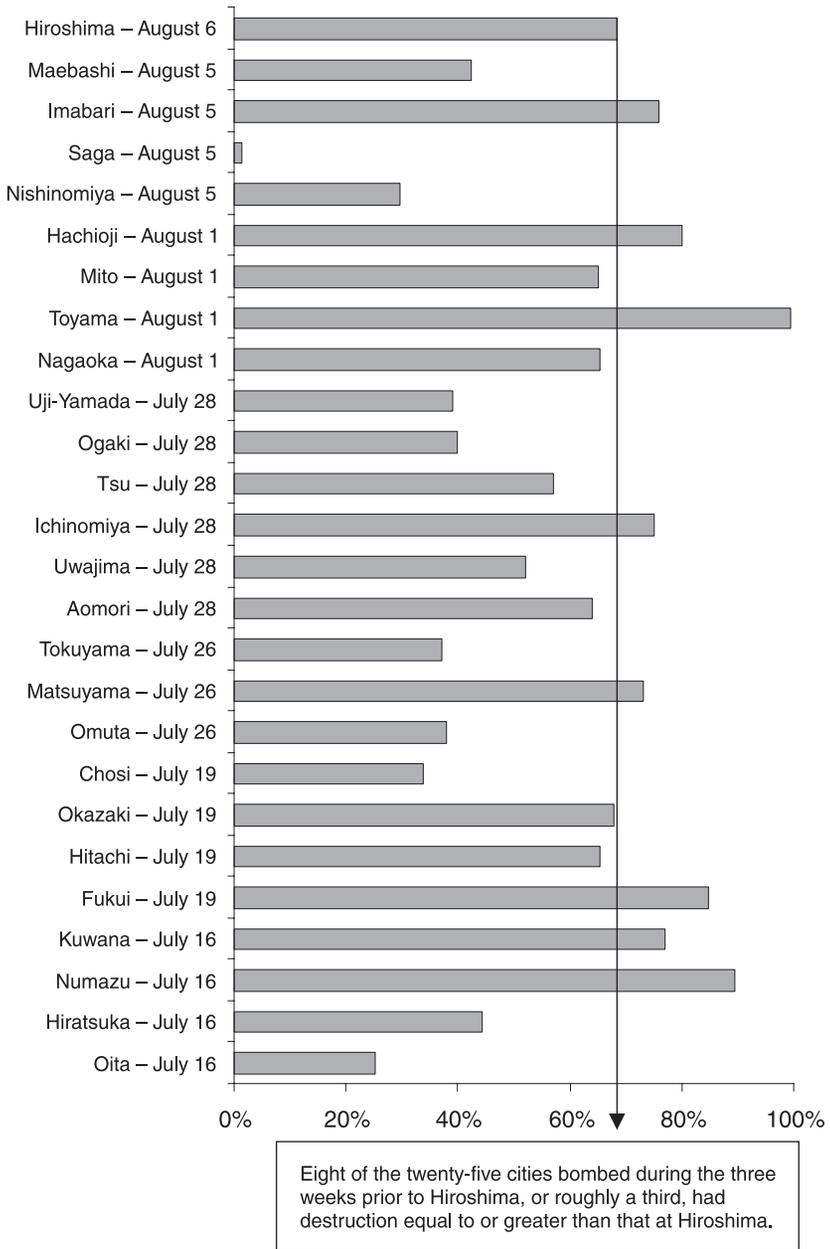
12. Frank, *Downfall*, p. 253.

13. The casualty figures are from *ibid.*, p. 334. The homeless, area, and buildings destroyed figures are from *United States Strategic Bombing Survey*, Vol. 9, “The Strategic Air Operations of Very Heavy Bombardment in the War against Japan,” in Pacific Report No. 66 (New York: Garland, 1976), p. 43.

14. By comparison, the population of Hiroshima in 1945 was roughly ten times greater, or 300,000 people. (Population figures for Hiroshima are disputed. See the discussion in Frank, *Downfall*, p. 285.)

15. The U.S. Air Force, however, sometimes dropped leaflets announcing the next targets of its conventional bombings, which lowered casualties in some attacks. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, p. 495.

Figure 1. City Destruction in the Three-Week Period prior to the Hiroshima Bombing



SOURCE: United States Strategic Survey, Pacific Report No. 66, "The Strategic Air Operations of Very Heavy Bombardment in the War against Japan (20th Air Force)," pp. 42-43.

the Supreme Council,¹⁶ the bombing of Hiroshima was accompanied by a bright flash of light; it was produced by just a few bombers; and it killed more than most city attacks. But in what way—measured by the result it produced—was it fundamentally different from other attacks that summer?¹⁷

This campaign of city attacks raises a troubling question for those who argue that nuclear weapons forced the Japanese surrender: If Hiroshima's destruction caused the Japanese to surrender, then why is it that the destruction of sixty-six other cities that summer did not? True, the means used to destroy Hiroshima were different, but means are rarely more important than ends. How could these other attacks have failed to sway the Japanese leadership, but the Hiroshima bombing have been decisive?

There is clear evidence that the campaign of city bombing did not loom large in the minds of Japan's leaders. First, they did not act as if the bombing were decisive. As the attacks continued, they neither surrendered nor abandoned plans to seek better terms. Second, the things they said do not evince a sense of crisis or acute pressure. During the climactic meeting on the night of August 9–10, elder statesman Baron Kiichiro Hiranuma posed a question to the military representatives about measures the army planned to take against atomic bombs. Chief of the Army General Staff Umezu replied that "the army was taking appropriate action, but that they would never surrender as a result of air raids."¹⁸ Umezu seems to be equating nuclear attacks with conventional air attacks, which is striking; but beyond that, he seems to be asserting that air attacks cannot be militarily decisive.¹⁹

16. Japan was ruled by a cabinet working in consultation with the emperor. In August 1944 an inner group of six members of the cabinet became, in effect, the ruling body of Japan. The Supreme Council consisted of Army Minister Anami, Army Chief of Staff Umezu, Navy Minister Yonai, Navy Chief of Staff Toyoda, Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki, and Foreign Minister Togo. The preponderance of military officials on the council reflects the dominant role played by the military in the government of Japan at this time.

17. In fact, the question of whether the Japanese would be able to distinguish a nuclear attack from a large conventional raid came up during U.S. planning discussions. J. Robert Oppenheimer, who headed the scientists trying to build the bomb, responded that "the visual effect of an atomic bombing would be tremendous. It would be accompanied by a brilliant luminescence which would rise to a height of 10,000 to 20,000 feet." He went on to estimate that the bomb would measure between 2,000 and 20,000 tons of TNT and would kill people with radiation for up to two-thirds of a mile. Read in light of the sometimes apocalyptic language used with nuclear weapons, Oppenheimer's answer seems curiously reserved. Frank, *Downfall*, p. 256.

18. Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, p. 211.

19. This attitude is in keeping with the experience of the British government in World War II. As far as I know, Churchill never considered surrendering because of attacks by the Luftwaffe on British cities. In fact, some historians have speculated that he deliberately goaded the Germans into switching from attacks on radar installations to British cities at a crucial moment in the Battle of Britain to protect the severely overstretched Royal Air Force. The apparent indifference of Japan's leaders is also in keeping with the German experience. Although the Germans had more civilians

Later in this same meeting, Hiranuma argued that continuing the war might lead to domestic upheaval. Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki interrupted to add support to the argument by saying that the people “cannot withstand the air-raids any longer.” Historian Richard Frank points out, “It is astonishing to note that these comments by Suzuki and one other isolated reference in May are the only documented references by a member of the Big Six to the strategic air campaign.”²⁰ The members of the Supreme Council mentioned city bombing only twice. It is difficult to argue, on the evidence, that the United States’ strategic bombing campaign was central to Japanese thinking.²¹

Hiroshima versus Soviet Intervention

When Japanese responses to the Hiroshima bombing are placed side by side with responses to the Soviet intervention, it is clear that the Soviet intervention touched off a crisis, while the Hiroshima bombing did not.

Japanese governing bodies did not display a sense of crisis after Hiroshima. First reports of an attack on that city reached Tokyo on August 6 and were confirmed the next day by fuller reports and an announcement by President Truman that a nuclear weapon had been used in the attack. Even after the attack was confirmed, however, the Supreme Council did not meet for two days.²² If the bombing of Hiroshima touched off a crisis, this delay is inexplicable. When President John Kennedy was informed on October 16, 1962, that the Soviet Union was placing missiles in Cuba, a new committee had been formed, its members selected, contacted, summoned to the White House, and the first meeting was under way in the Cabinet room within two hours and forty-five minutes. When the North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950, President Truman was vacationing at home in Independence, Missouri. After being alerted by telephone, Truman had, in less than twenty-four hours, flown half-way across the United States, arrived in Washington, D.C., and was seated

killed due to aerial bombing than any other belligerent, the German government did not consider surrendering because of city bombing. In fact, city bombing seems to have stiffened rather than weakened the will of the countries that were bombed. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

20. “The Big Six” is another name for the Supreme Council. Frank, *Downfall*, p. 294 n.

21. See especially Pape, “Why Japan Surrendered”; and, more generally, Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

22. The delay is three days if one argues that they had enough information to conclude that they had been attacked with a nuclear weapon on August 6. There is some evidence for this. Whether the bombing of Hiroshima was ever put on the agenda for discussion by the Supreme Council is unclear. It was discussed at the meeting on August 9, but that meeting appears to have been called as a result of the Soviet invasion.

at a meeting with thirteen senior officials (including the secretaries and commanders of the three military services). In all, three full days elapsed after the bombing of Hiroshima in which the Supreme Council did not meet to discuss the bombing.²³ When the Soviets intervened on August 9 and word of the invasion reached Tokyo at around 4:30 A.M., on the other hand, the Supreme Council met by 10:30 that same morning.²⁴

The actions of several individual officials also reflect Japanese perceptions of the relative seriousness of the two events. For example, when Army Deputy Chief of Staff Torashiro Kawabe heard the news of the attack on Hiroshima, he noted in his diary that the news had given him a “serious jolt” (*shigeki*—he did not use the word for “shock”: *shogeki*); but, he opined, “We must be tenacious and fight on.”²⁵ When he heard the news of the Soviet entry into the war, he immediately drew up orders to declare martial law (which were implemented); and in the emergency meeting of top army officers that was convened that morning, he raised the possibility of toppling the government and replacing it with a military dictatorship.²⁶ Contrast a “jolt,” on the one hand, and declaring marshal law and considering toppling the government, on the other, and the difference in the perceived importance of the two events is clear.

Following the bombing of Hiroshima, Emperor Hirohito took no action except to repeatedly request “more details.” When word of the Soviet invasion reached him, however, the emperor immediately summoned Lord Privy Seal Kido and told him, “In light of the Soviet entry . . . it was all the more urgent to find a means to end the war.” He commanded Kido to “have a heart-to-heart talk” with Prime Minister Suzuki without delay.²⁷

23. Foreign Minister Togo requested a meeting, but no meeting was held. In addition, several high-ranking army officials appear to have concluded that Hiroshima had been bombed with a nuclear weapon as early as August 6. Asada, “The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan’s Decision to Surrender,” p. 505.

24. Some analysts have argued that the delay is understandable and cite historians’ accounts that the Japanese government had failed to act decisively all summer long, and the vacillating emperor simply found it difficult to make decisions quickly. Drea, for example, characterizes Hirohito as “a cautious procrastinator.” Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor*, p. 215. When leaflets were dropped on August 14, however, revealing to the public the secret surrender negotiations that had been going on between the Japanese government and the Allies, Kido met with the emperor “within minutes” of seeing a leaflet, and Suzuki joined them shortly thereafter. They agreed to accept the Allied terms as they stood and moved up the time of the Supreme Council meeting from 1:00 P.M. to 11:00 A.M. The emperor and his advisers were able to act swiftly in a crisis. See Frank, *Downfall*, pp. 313–314.

25. Quoted in Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, p. 200.

26. Frank, *Downfall*, pp. 288–289.

27. Asada, “The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan’s Decision to Surrender,” p. 490. As always, the actual statements are suspect. But it is clear that Hirohito took immediate action, summoning officials and issuing orders, in contrast to his more passive response to the atomic bombing.

The diary of Deputy Chief of Staff for the Navy Sokichi Takagi provides a remarkable illustration of Japanese attitudes toward the attack on Hiroshima at the highest levels of government. On August 8 (two days after the atomic bomb was dropped), he relates a conversation with his boss, Navy Minister Yonai. Yonai begins by complaining about Prime Minister Suzuki's lack of understanding of the dangers of the domestic situation. (This is a favorite topic for Yonai, who has been supporting efforts to negotiate an immediate peace because he fears a popular, possibly communist, uprising.) They talk for a while back and forth, Takagi agreeing with Yonai: "In my opinion, someone like the Interior Minister should have a straight talk with the Prime Minister about domestic conditions." Takagi then reminds his boss of a prediction that now seems to be coming true: "I used to think that by September or October the domestic situation would rapidly deteriorate while you said it would start deteriorating in mid-August. Actually, the situation is getting steadily worse in many respects during these couple of days, especially after Hiroshima." Yonai agrees and says, "Bad news continues and the ration of rice in Tokyo will be reduced by ten percent after [the] 11th of this month."²⁸ They go on to talk about the schedule for the Supreme Council meeting the next day, rumors about who is influencing the emperor, more discussion of the prime minister, and worries that they have yet to hear anything positive from the Soviets.

Three things are clear. First, the bomb is not the center of the conversation; its mention is incidental. Second, the bomb is only one item in a list of bad news. (One is left with the impression that Yonai was more concerned about rice rationing than nuclear attack.) Finally, the talk provides more evidence that the Japanese government was not focused on the atomic bomb. Yonai says that the independence of East India will be on the agenda for the Supreme Council meeting the next day.²⁹ He does not say the Hiroshima bombing is to be on the agenda. The Supreme Council, therefore, had not cleared its agenda on August 9 to focus on the bomb. It is difficult to square the offhand way in which Hiroshima is discussed in accounts such as this with the idea that the atomic bombing so shocked Japanese leaders that they agreed to unconditional surrender.

There is virtually no contemporaneous evidence that the U.S. use of a nuclear weapon against Hiroshima created a crisis or that Japanese leaders

28. For the full text of this document, see *Diary of Takagi Sokichi for Wednesday, August 8, 1945*, quoted in Burr, "The Atomic Bomb at the End of World War II," doc. 55.

29. I believe this is a euphemistic reference to the planned withdrawal of 30,000 troops from Burma.

viewed it as decisive.³⁰ In a way, this is not surprising, because top U.S. officials also did not believe that the bomb would be decisive. The bomb project staff had set a schedule that called for ten bombs to be ready by the end of November, which would not have been necessary if the bombing of Hiroshima was expected to end the war. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, in a letter dated August 8, urged President Truman to replace Gen. Douglas MacArthur as the commander of the invasion of Japan. This letter would have created tremendous controversy in Washington, and Forrestal would not have risked such a showdown if he expected the war to end immediately. Secretary of War Henry Stimson was clearly taken off guard by Japan's offer to negotiate a surrender. He was preparing to leave for a few days of well-deserved vacation when Japan's surrender offer arrived on August 10. Would he have planned to leave town if he thought negotiations to end the war were in the offing? Finally, in an appreciation prepared for Secretary of the Army George Marshall dated August 12, army intelligence asserted, "The atomic bomb will not have a decisive effect in the next 30 days."³¹

The importance of the Soviet Union to Japan's strategic situation, on the other hand, is confirmed by official records. In a meeting held in late June, General Kawabe asserted, "The absolute maintenance of peace in our relations with the Soviet Union is one of the fundamental conditions for continuing

30. The account that Foreign Minister Togo gives in his memoirs supports this view: "I informed [the emperor] of the enemy's announcement of the use of an atomic bomb, and related matters, and I said that it was now all the more imperative that we end the war, which we could seize this opportunity to do." Shigenori Togo, *The Cause of Japan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 315. Togo does not say that Japan is now irrevocably coerced; he does not argue that there is now no other alternative. He says that the atomic bombing is an opportunity that they should seize. Kido, in his postwar account, agreed: "It is not correct to say that we were driven by the atomic bomb to end the war. Rather it might be said that we of the peace party were assisted by the atomic bomb in our endeavor to end the war." Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender," p. 497. Japanese leaders do not give a sense of being compelled or forced, and there is little evidence of a sense of crisis in the government. There is no contemporary account, for example, of Japanese officials relating a moment when they sat aghast and stunned, overwhelmed by a sense of defeat. There does not appear to be any evidence that Hiroshima engendered these sorts of feelings, except in ex post facto accounts.

31. Forrestal's letter may be found in Burr, "The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II," doc. 42. The estimate of the bomb's failure to be decisive for thirty days may be found in doc. 69 of the same collection. Stimson's behavior is particularly interesting because of his postwar claims that the U.S. government expected the bomb to deliver a decisive shock. In addition, in April 1945 the Joint Intelligence Committee had asserted, "The entry of the USSR into the war would, together with the foregoing factors, convince most Japanese at once of the inevitability of complete defeat." Quoted in Alperovitz, "Hiroshima: Historians Reassess," pp. 20–21. For a similar judgment about the expectations of U.S. officials, see Barton Bernstein's portion of the H-Diplo roundtable discussion of *Racing the Enemy*.

the war with the United States.” In that same meeting, the Supreme Council agreed that Soviet entry into the war would “determine the fate of the Empire.”³²

History in the Service of National Goals

Historians often point to Japanese statements made after the war as proof that the U.S. nuclear attack on Hiroshima was decisive. These statements are far from uniform, however. Japanese leaders had two motives for concealing the truth about their decision, and historians are increasingly demonstrating that these statements are suspect.³³ Japanese officials knew that many of their number would face war crimes trials after the war, and that it was in their interest to present a view of history that was congenial to their U.S. captors. In addition, Japanese leaders, and particularly military leaders, were at pains to find a suitable explanation for their loss in the war. The matter-of-fact attitude that Japan’s leaders took toward dissembling is illustrated by a conversation between Navy Minister Yonai and his deputy chief of staff on August 12: “I think the term is inappropriate, but the atomic bombs and the Soviet entry into the war are, in a sense, gifts from the gods [*tenyu*, also ‘Heaven-sent blessings’]. This way we don’t have to say that we have quit the war because of domestic circumstances. Why I have long been advocating control of the crisis of the country is neither from fear of an enemy attack nor because of the atomic bombs and the Soviet entry into the war. The main reason is my anxiety over the domestic situation. So, it is rather fortunate that now we can control matters without revealing the domestic situation.”³⁴

The bomb offered a convenient explanation to soothe wounded Japanese pride: the defeat of Japan was not the result of leadership mistakes or lack of valor; it was the result of an unexpected advance in science by Japan’s enemy. Lord Privy Seal Kido explained after the war: “If military leaders could convince themselves that they were defeated by the power of science but not by lack of spiritual power or strategic errors, they could save face to some extent.”³⁵ Cabinet Secretary Hisatsune Sakomizu was even more explicit: “In

32. Asada, “The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan’s Decision to Surrender,” p. 504.

33. See, for example, Frank, *Downfall*, pp. 271–272, 446; Asada, “The Shock of the Atomic Bombing and Japan’s Decision to Surrender,” p. 484; and Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, pp. 513, 529. This should perhaps not be surprising in a culture that has a developed concept (*haragei*) for negotiations carried on by saying one thing while meaning another.

34. Quoted in Frank, *Downfall*, p. 310.

35. Asada, “The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan’s Decision to Surrender,” p. 507.

ending the war, the idea was to put the responsibility for defeat on the atomic bomb alone, and not on the military. This was a clever pretext."³⁶

National pride and considerations of international influence also provide important reasons for Americans to deny the decisive nature of the Soviet intervention. If the bomb ended the war in the Pacific, then the United States could take credit for fighting and defeating Japan. U.S. prestige and influence in the region and around the world would be enhanced. And because the United States was sole possessor of the bomb, the perception of U.S. military power would also be enhanced. If the Soviet intervention ended the war with Japan, then the Soviets could claim that they were able to achieve in four days what the United States was unable to accomplish in four years, and Soviet influence would be enhanced. There are strong reasons, therefore, why even today it would be difficult for Americans to admit that the Soviet intervention was decisive.

A Reasonable Mistake

Any striking reinterpretation of a well-known and long-received account of historical events must offer an explanation of how and why the original misinterpretation occurred.³⁷ Six factors served to mislead U.S. investigators who originally looked into the causes of the Japanese surrender. The first factor is the remarkable (although superficial) appearance of causality in the original train of events. The bomb was dropped on August 6, and on August 10 the Japanese signaled their intention to negotiate a surrender. It would have been easy to be fooled by the proximity of the two events. Second, Japanese leaders willfully colluded to mislead the Americans. Both to please the occupying conquerors and to obscure the causes of defeat, it was in the interests of Japanese leaders to overstress the importance of the bomb. Third, it was in the United States' interest to believe that the bomb was decisive. Fourth, the Japanese systematically destroyed documents from the war years, reducing the amount of contemporaneous documentary evidence. Fifth, there has been a pronounced

36. Frank, *Downfall*, p. 348. Strikingly, although Hirohito mentioned the atomic bomb in his rescript for the people of Japan, in the rescript issued to Japan's military forces on August 17, the invasion by the Soviets is given as the sole reason the war must be brought to a close. The absence of the bomb in this context illustrates the point that Japan's leaders did not believe that military men would view civilian suffering as a sufficient reason to surrender.

37. Notably, the British official history states, "The Russian declaration of war was the decisive factor in bringing Japan to accept the Potsdam declaration." S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War against Japan*, Vol. 5: *The Surrender of Japan* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1969), pp. 433–434. See also May, "The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Far Eastern War.

difficulty (perhaps the result of language or cultural differences) for U.S. investigators to stand imaginatively in the shoes of Japan's leaders.³⁸

Finally, those who attempt to interpret these events today have an important advantage of perspective. When Robert Butow (the first and still one of the most important scholars of the Japanese decision to surrender) wrote about these issues in the early 1950s, the influence and importance of nuclear weapons were at their height. Nuclear weapons dominated military thinking and political debates. Since the mid-1960s, however, the importance of nuclear weapons has steadily declined. Today there are no nuclear confrontations like the Berlin crisis of 1961 or Cuban missile crisis of 1962; most tactical nuclear weapons have been retired; and strategic nuclear arsenals have shrunk. While Herblock could draw a cartoon in the late 1950s of a giant atomic bomb man measuring the world (presumably preparatory to blowing it up), we no longer think of nuclear weapons as an ominous presence that dominates our lives. Perspective makes it easier, for us, to imagine that nuclear weapons do not loom behind every important event.

Conclusion

This revision of history has far-reaching and profound implications for contemporary thinking about nuclear war. The field of nuclear weapons scholarship is like a large structure standing precariously on only a handful of support posts. (The study of nuclear war is possibly the largest field of thought supported by the fewest facts since the theological debates of medieval scholars.) This structure has, roughly, five fact-posts: (1) the results of test explosions in deserts and on islands, (2) knowledge about the capabilities of missiles, (3) some knowledge about post-Hiroshima/Nagasaki medical effects, (4) what little is certain and measurable about human decisionmaking under duress, and (5) the outcome of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Change the meaning of any one of these few fact-posts, and the whole structure shudders.

For example, consider calculations about nuclear war. When nuclear war strategists imagine what impact various levels of collateral damage would

38. Historians frequently try to identify the moment this or that Japanese leader changed his mind and decided to seek peace. Japanese leaders, however, planned to negotiate a settlement to the war from its very outset. The issue was how to obtain acceptable terms, not whether to seek peace. Historians often misunderstand the negotiations that went on within the Japanese government because government by consensus is so poorly understood in the West. (Forrest Morgan, Edward Drea, and John Dower are notable exceptions.)

have on political decisionmakers, their judgments are based, in part, on their assessment of Hiroshima. One can imagine them saying to themselves, "If the deaths of 90,000 people led Japan to surrender, then the deaths of X million would lead to . . ." If the traditional interpretation of Hiroshima is revised, these calculations—and all other calculations that similarly rely on the outcome of Hiroshima—will also have to be rethought.

Or, to take another example, consider nuclear threats. The field of nuclear threats is more firmly grounded than that of nuclear war because it rests on far more actual experience—there are many more historical data points to extrapolate from. But even so, the chief example of the effectiveness of nuclear threats must still be Truman's warning on August 6 that unless the Japanese surrendered, "they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth." If it is now admitted that this threat failed to successfully coerce, the odds of any nuclear threat working have to be recalculated.

Of course, analysts often argue that two small bombs used at end of World War II—and any conclusions that might be drawn from their use—have little relevance for thinking about a modern nuclear war, which would be waged with hundreds or even thousands of nuclear weapons tipped with much larger explosives. This objection overlooks the fact that shrinking warhead sizes have considerably reduced the differences in destructive power between modern weapons and the Hiroshima bomb.³⁹ But the principal response to this objection is that the majority of nations with nuclear weapons have relatively small arsenals. Only four nuclear powers have more than 200 nuclear weapons of all kinds in their arsenals, and three others are estimated to have fewer than 60 strategic weapons. Nations that acquire nuclear weapons in the near future are

39. The general perception of the vast difference in size between the Hiroshima bomb and today's bombs results from a misleading emphasis on yield. Much of any increase in the yield of an explosion is wasted at the center of the explosion, rebounding the rubble, as it were. More useful comparisons are based on area of destruction caused. Compare, for example, the radii of the 5 psi (pounds per square inch) circles of one of the largest weapons in today's arsenals (1 megaton) versus the Hiroshima bomb. Although the yield of the larger weapon is 62.5 times greater, the difference in destructive area (depending on the height of the burst and other factors) is roughly 6 times bigger. I do not mean to imply that modern nuclear weapons are not horrible or destructive weapons, simply that dismissing comparisons with the Hiroshima bomb out of hand may be based on an emotional impression rather than careful analysis. For example, an Office of Technology Assessment study in the 1970s of an attack against Philadelphia with two 1-megaton bombs (assuming 10 percent evacuation) mirrored the outcome at Hiroshima: two-thirds of the city destroyed and one-third of the population killed. Office of Technology Assessment, *The Effects of Nuclear War* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Technology Assessment, 1979), pp. 69–72. City growth has had an impact as well. A 1-megaton bomb exploded over Los Angeles would cover only 6 percent of that city with its 5 psi circle.

likely to have small arsenals. The chance, therefore, of a nuclear war involving an exchange of only a handful of nuclear weapons is significant and continually increasing. In that sort of war, the experience of Japan at the end of World War II looms large.⁴⁰ If anything, as the number of nations with small arsenals increases, the relevance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will increase as well.

In addition, the logic of deterrence may be different where small arsenals are concerned. If destroying one or two cities does not coerce an opponent, then perhaps the threat of limited nuclear retaliation does not deter when the stakes are high enough. Deterrence theory, after all, was developed in a world in which massive retaliation was the overriding conception of nuclear war. Would retaliation on a much smaller scale deter in the same way?⁴¹

Since the late 1940s, various events have occasionally raised doubts about the usefulness of nuclear weapons. Most tactical nuclear weapons were retired in the 1980s; strategic nuclear arsenals have been reduced; the brief U.S. nuclear monopoly after World War II did not yield dramatically enhanced diplomatic influence; in the last fifteen years, a number of responsible nations have abandoned nuclear weapons development efforts (and some have even surrendered weapons in hand); a number of nations have fought wars in which they were unable to find a role for their nuclear weapons; and both the United States and the Soviet Union fought wars in which their nuclear weapons could not prevent defeat (Vietnam and Afghanistan). Taken together, these events have, over time, reduced the perceived importance of nuclear weapons. It would be difficult to argue that we view nuclear weapons today in the same way that observers in the 1950s or 1960s did. Against this evidence of a steady decline in importance, however, has always been balanced the argument that the bomb won the war in the Pacific. If nuclear weapons played no role in the surrender of Japan, perhaps it is time to conduct a serious, far-reaching review of the general usefulness of nuclear weapons.

40. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this striking point.

41. Again, I am indebted to the same anonymous reviewer for this interesting argument.