

Hiroshima: New Facts and Old Myths

Dr. Gar Alperovitz, University of Maryland

This is a summary by Dick Atlee of his speech at
Iowa State University at Ames (1994)
(available on CD for purchase at [Alternative Radio](#))
(available in Maine through the [Southwest Harbor Public Library, CD/940.54/Alp](#))

see also Gar Alperovitz's book, [The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb](#) (1996)
(available in Maine through the [Rockland and Scarborough Public Libraries, 940.54/Alp](#))

Contents

[Summary](#)

- A. [What We Know Now](#)
- B. [What Was Known \(But Not Made Public\) Then](#)
- C. [The Myth](#)
- D. [Five Key Background Items on Japan's Situation](#)
- E. [Obvious Conclusion of These Five Points](#)
- F. [Russia in Europe, and the Bomb](#)
- G. [Potsdam, and the Ambivalence About a Russian Attack on Japan](#)
- H. [The Non-"Decision" to Drop the Bomb](#)
- I. [The Rush to the Finish](#)
- J. [The Myth of Casualties](#)
- K. [Opinions of Contemporary Top U.S. Military Leaders](#)
- L. [The Real Decision: Shock and Awe -- the Use of the Bomb Against Cities](#)

Summary

The dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was largely irrelevant to the war effort against Japan. A combination of two options -- Russian entry into the war, and a promise of immunity for the emperor, both of which actually occurred -- were well understood at the time to be sufficient to induce a surrender the Japanese had already long been seeking. Thus, the dropping of the bomb had no role in saving American lives by avoiding an invasion -- an invasion whose cost in lives (as estimated by the War Department at the time) would have been at most a tenth or twentieth of the number still claimed by popular myth. Diaries, writings and public statements of the main U.S. policy officials at the time make it clear that the principal architect of the dropping of the bomb, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, was interested in the bomb as a deterrent to post-war Russian influence in Europe and Asia. And the moral issue at the heart of the affair was the decision to drop the bomb on cities populated almost exclusively by women, children, cripples, and the aged.

A. What We Know Now

"Careful scholarly treatment of the records and manuscripts opened over the past few years has greatly enhanced our understanding of why the Truman administration used atomic weapons against Japan. Experts continue to disagree on some issues, but critical questions have been answered. The consensus among scholars is that the bomb was not needed to avoid an invasion of Japan. It is clear that alternatives to the bomb existed, and that Truman and his advisers knew it."

-- Chief historian of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, summarizing the consensus of modern experts based on newly declassified and discovered documents

B. What Was Known (But Not Made Public) Then

"Certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November, Japan would have surrendered, even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated."

-- official United States Strategic Bombing Survey, June 1946

"The dropping of the bomb was the pretext seized upon by all leaders [of Japan] as the reason for ending the war, but the various chain of events that led up to this make it almost a certainty that the Japanese would have capitulated upon the [August 8 1945] entry of Russia into the war. The Japanese leaders had decided to surrender and were merely looking for a sufficient pretext to convince the Army group that Japan had lost the war and must capitulate to the Allies. The entry of Russia into the war would almost certainly have furnished this pretext and would have been sufficient to convince all responsible leaders that surrender was unavoidable. [an invasion was only a "remote" possibility.]"

-- report of the Strategic Policy Group of the Operations Planning Division of the War Department

(discovered misfiled in the National Archives, in 1989 by a Spanish researcher)

C. The Myth

400,000 to 1 million American lives and perhaps 1 million Japanese lives were saved by the use of the bomb because it prevented an invasion.

D. Five Key Background Items on Japan's Situation

1. Japan was already essentially defeated by April 1945

- a. The U.S. Navy had cut off supplies, almost fully encircled Japan
- b. The U.S. Army Air Corps was bombing at will with almost no losses
- c. Japan had few planes and limited fuel and ammunition, and was trying to make planes from bamboo and fuel out of acorns)
- d. U.S. intelligence studies agree the war was over, the only question being how long before Japanese realized and acted on this.

2. Russia's war-long neutrality pact with Japan was due to expire in 1945

- a. November 1943 ([Tehran Conference](#)): Russia agrees to invade Japan after Germany surrenders.
- b. February 1945 ([Yalta Conference](#)): Russia agrees to invade Japan 90 days after the

defeat of Germany (enough time to get troops across the Trans-Siberian Railway to Manchuria).

- c. April 5: Russia announces it will not renew the neutrality pact.
 - d. April: U.S. intelligence says that if/when the Russians attack, it will trigger the first step of an invasion, and will lead to a surrender if assurances are given for the emperor.
 - e. May 8: Germany's defeat sets the Russian invasion clock in motion (for August 8).
 - f. June: [General George C. Marshall](#) (Pacific Commander) says the simple shock of a Russian attack may well "lever" Japan into surrender.
3. **Japan was attempting to surrender, the emperor's survival being the key.**
- a. 1940: The U.S. cracks the Japanese diplomatic code, has access to all subsequent Japanese diplomatic communications.
 - b. June/July 1945: Japanese decide to try end the war, send official/unofficial peace feelers all over the world.
 - c. July 12: Emperor breaks tradition, asks Russia to accept personal rep to negotiate end to the war.
 - d. All these feelers appear to have had a bottom line single condition: Keep the emperor (who is regarded as a deity) in some form, even just a figurehead; if this is not clear they will fight to the death.
(Note: this was readily agreed to by the U.S. in the August surrender -- but only after the bombs had already been dropped.)
4. **The atomic bomb was still only a theory by May/June/early-July.**
Not something to be counted on to end the war with Japan
5. **Invasion timing**
- a. An invasion would not have occurred until March/April 1946.
 - b. A first preliminary landing was scheduled for Kyushu on November 1, 1945

E. Obvious Conclusion of These Five Points

By early July -- well before even the possible initial landing -- there was a clear way available to end the war:

1. Russians enter the war, and
2. Allow Japanese to keep their god-emperor

(Note -- It's worth noting that Truman was advised at the time that **either** of these would have been sufficient to induce surrender. There is some disagreement among latter-day experts as to whether the emperor-guarantee would have been sufficient, but there is virtually no disagreement that both inducements together would have sufficed.)

F. Russia in Europe, and the Bomb

1. Tension between US/Britain and Russia over control of Europe
 - a. The Red Army has driven the Germans out of Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland
 - b. Serious arguments develop over the makeup of the Polish government
2. April 12: Roosevelt dies and Harry Truman's first full briefing about the bomb had to do with dealing with the Russians in Europe
3. Sample metaphors used for the bomb's significance to the Russians:

- a. President [Harry Truman](#): bomb will be a "hammer on those boys"
 - b. Secretary of State [James F. Byrnes](#): "stick behind the door"
 - c. Secretary of War [Henry L. Stimson](#): "master card of diplomacy" and "pistol on our hip"
4. Extended quotes
- a. **Stimson's diary (May 14, and similarly in many other entries):** "I told [Asst Secretary of War] McCoy that my opinion was that the time now, and the method now, to deal with Russia, was to keep our mouths shut and let our actions speak for words. The Russians will understand them better than anything else. It is a case where we have got to regain the lead, and perhaps do it in a pretty rough and realistic way. This is a place where we really hold all the cards. I call it a royal straight flush, and we mustn't be a fool about the way we play it. They can't get along without our help and industries, and we have coming into action a weapon which will be unique. Now the thing is to not get into unnecessary quarrels by talking too much, and not to indicate any weakness by talking too much. Let our actions speak for words."
 - b. **Stimson's diary (May 15):** "It 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 wave of problems, the S1 [atomic bomb] secret would be dominant. And yet, we will not know until after that time, probably, whether this is a weapon in our hands or not. We think it will be, shortly afterwards, but it seems a terrible thing to gamble with such big stakes in diplomacy without having your master card in your hand."
 - c. **Atomic Bomb physicist [Leo Szilard](#), reporting on a conversation with the Secretary of State:** "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 in Europe."
 - d. **Ambassador to Russia [Joseph E. Davies](#):** wrote much the same thing.

G. [Potsdam](#), and the Ambivalence About a Russian Attack on Japan

1. The issue facing the U.S. by Russian entry into the war:
 - a. Good -- will provide the shock value that would force Japan to surrender.
 - b. Bad -- gives the Russians potentially increased influence in Far East.
2. Churchill begs Truman to meet with Russians about Europe immediately -- if the U.S. pulls troops out to go to Japan, there's no bargaining power with the Russians.
3. Pattern of negotiations:
 - a. Encourage Russians until test can prove the bomb
 - b. After test, constantly stall so as to keep them out of the war
4. The crucial dates
 - a. July 16: scheduled [Trinity nuclear test](#) at Alamogordo, New Mexico
 - b. July 17: scheduled Potsdam meeting with Stalin (no coincidence about the timing)

H. The Non-"Decision" to Drop the Bomb

1. Historically, there is no complicated set of policy papers or meetings dealing with pros/cons of using the bomb, nor anyone saying that a decision has been made to use the bomb.
2. So it looks superficially like it "just happened"

3. What actually happened -- Major decisions were made eliminating (a) Russian entry and (b) the maintenance of the emperor, thus leaving the bomb as the only alternative. Anyone then opposing the use of the bomb could be accused of condemning an invasion force to death.
4. After July 17: three decisions are made
 - a. Every major policy maker (except one) agrees that to have Japan surrender before a landing/invasion, it is necessary to give them an ultimatum early and tell them they can keep emperor, and do this well in advance to allow for political digestion. Yet a decision is made to postpone this warning till the last minute.
 - b. The Joint Chiefs and all British/American government members (except one) say that the Japanese must be told they can keep the emperor.
 1. The unanimously approved **draft** Potsdam Proclamation warns Japan to surrender or else, and states generally in **Paragraph 12** they can keep the emperor.

(12) The occupying forces of the Allies shall be withdrawn from Japan as soon as these objectives have been accomplished and there has been established in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people a peacefully inclined and responsible government. **This may include a constitutional monarchy under the present dynasty if the peace-loving nations can be convinced of the genuine determination of such a government to follow policies of peace which will render impossible the future development of aggressive militarism in Japan.**

2. The **actual** Potsdam Proclamation as issued omits that last sentence of Paragraph 12; it is well documented that all involved knew that Japan would not accept the proclamation's terms.
3. The one holdout in these cases, and the man whose overriding influence appears clearly to have removed Paragraph 12's emperor retention provision, was Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, Truman's former mentor in the Senate, who was preoccupied, not with Japan, but with **dealing with the Russians in Europe and Asia**.
- c. A decision is made to stall the negotiations with the Chinese Foreign Minister as long as possible to keep the Russians out.

I. The Rush to the Finish

1. July 26: The Potsdam Proclamation is issued, omitting the Paragraph 12 provision for retention of the emperor
2. July 28: Intercepted Japanese cables use the term "*mokusatsu*" to describe their reaction, which can mean reject, or ignore, or take under advisement, or study. The U.S. later claims it meant "reject," but the cables appear to refer to a need to study it.
3. August 1: The bomb is ready; Truman says use it any time after August 2.
4. August 6: On this first weather-friendly day, Hiroshima is bombed.
5. August 8: Russia enters the war as initially agreed at Yalta (May 8 + 3 months)
6. August 9: Nagasaki is bombed

7. August 10: Japan says it will surrender
8. August 11: The U.S. agrees to the Japanese insistence on keeping the emperor.

J. The Myth of Casualties

1. Truman's later claim, which produced the current myth: **a half-million to a million.**
2. Modern expert understanding (also understood by all at the time): **virtually zero**, since the war would have ended before an invasion once Russia had entered and assurances were given for the emperor.
The Russian entry and the concession on the emperor, all of which happened in early August, but could also have happened in September or October as well, would have resulted in no invasion.
3. In any case, War Department planning estimates of casualties (at the time):
 - a. For a full invasion, the maximum number found in any documents: **only 46,000.**
 - b. For the preliminary November landing at Kyushu, maximum number: **only 25,000.**

K. Opinions of Contemporary Top U.S. Military Leaders (Conservative men who knew everything about the situation)

1. [General Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) (speaking about Secretary of War Stimson telling that the bombs would be used):
"During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression, and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated, that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly, because I thought our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives. Japan was at that very moment seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of face. It wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing."
2. [Admiral William D. Leahy](#) (Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff and Chief of Staff and good friend of the president), publicly said after the bombing:
"The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender. The use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan at all. In being the first to use it, we adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion. Wars cannot be won by destroying women and children."
3. [General Douglas MacArthur](#) (Commander in Chief in the Pacific), described by Nixon:
"General MacArthur once spoke to me very eloquently about it, pacing the floor of his apartment in the Waldorf. He thought it a tragedy that the bomb was ever exploded. MacArthur believed that the same restrictions ought to apply to atomic weapons as to conventional weapons, that the military objective should always be limited, and should limit damage to noncombatants. MacArthur, you see, was a soldier. He believed in using force only against military targets, and that is why the nuclear thing turned him off."

L. The Real Decision: Shock and Awe -- the Use of the Bomb Against Cities

1. Many of the scientists wanted only a demonstration, presumably thinking of a remote spot.

2. General George C. Marshall (Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army) suggested: hit a major military target in Japan, such as a navy base, rather than a city (which contains only women, children, cripples, and the elderly).