

Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory

BARTON J. BERNSTEIN

The Allied war against Japan ended on 14 August 1945, following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which were sandwiched around Soviet entry into the Pacific war on the 8th. Tucked away amid these dramatic actions were some important but generally neglected events, virtually lost in modern memory: Japan's offer on the 10th of a conditional surrender with a guarantee of the imperial system; America's intentionally ambiguous reply on the 11th; a resulting sharp split in the Japanese government over whether to continue the war; the emperor's second intervention to push for surrender and peace; and a nearly successful coup in Japan that might have prolonged the war and provoked America's use of a third A-bomb and possibly even more atomic bombs. Because the war ended on the 14th and the third bomb was never used, analysts have generally ignored this important period of 10–14 August. Studies of the A-bomb have often also neglected the heavy conventional bombing of Japan during the spring and summer of 1945, culminating in a thousand-plane attack on the 14th, with some squadrons dropping their deadly cargo after Japan's announced surrender.

In focusing on the atomic bombings, analysts have usually devoted little attention to the related decision, and disputes, about whether and when to invade Japan. In analyzing the use of the A-bombs on Japan, studies have normally dwelled on other contested issues: Why were these weapons used? Were the A-bombs necessary to end the war? Would Japan have surrendered before 1 November 1945 (the date scheduled for the Kyushu invasion) if one

or more of the various alternatives had been tried instead of the bomb? Why did Truman not pursue these so-called alternatives instead?

These important questions require an examination of the period well before Hiroshima until slightly after Nagasaki, because the basic decisions about the bomb were made well before 6 August, because the mass conventional bombing during the spring and summer helped define the context for the atomic bombing of cities, because the thinking about the invasion was shaped in that period, and because the little-known events after Nagasaki suggest how easily the war might well have dragged on past 14 August 1945. Had that occurred, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, especially if conjoined to A-bombings of Kokura and even elsewhere, might occupy a different place in modern memory, because the war would not have ended so soon and after only twice dropping the bomb on Japanese cities.

Such informed and useful speculations about how differently the war might have ended in the summer of 1945 do not undercut, or invalidate, conclusions that also move in the opposite direction: that it is *likely, but far from definite*, that a combination of non-nuclear options could have ended the war in the summer without the atomic bombings. Admittedly, the gap between “likely” and “definite” is unfortunately wide enough to suggest a troubling alternative history – of a longer war, more battles, and many dead before Japan surrendered.

But no suggestion that the Pacific war, without the use of the A-bomb, *might* have continued into the autumn or slightly beyond constitutes, necessarily, an ethical justification for the use of that weapon and the killing of over 120,000 and possibly more than 200,000 Japanese, and perhaps over 20,000 Koreans.¹ Put bluntly, this historical analysis of events may influence, but may not control, ethical judgments about the use of the atomic bomb in 1945. It is such judgments, however, that often help define the beliefs

1 The Committee for the Compilation of Materials on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, trans. Eisei Ishikawa and David L. Swain, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Physical, Medical, and Social Effects of the Atomic Bombings* (New York, 1981), 359–74, 468–75; the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS), *The Effects of Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (Washington, 1946), 33.

about Hiroshima, and sometimes Nagasaki, that reside in modern memory.

II

Few events in modern American history have attracted as much attention, and provoked as much dispute, as the use of the atomic bomb. The analysis of the use of that weapon has had a curious, and often polemical, history.² One school ("orthodox") stresses that the atomic bombing was necessary, that the bomb saved many American lives (possibly a quarter million or more), and that not using it would have been unconscionable. Another school ("revisionist") argues that the atomic bombing was unnecessary, that American leaders knew that Japan was near defeat and hence near surrender, and that the bomb was used for an ulterior purpose. In this framework, the motive of intimidating the Soviet Union is usually cited as primary, though sometimes analysts define it as secondary but essential, and occasionally historians also stress bureaucratic interests as playing a controlling role in the decision to drop the A-bomb on Japan. By implication, and often by assertion, the revisionists are quite sure that the war against Japan could have been ended without the bomb, that ulterior motives blocked other approaches, and that the use of the bomb was clearly immoral.³

Between these two schools, a third has emerged, employing parts of the revisionist and orthodox analyses to conclude in a new synthesis: that the A-bomb was conceived as a legitimate weapon to be used against the enemy; that this assumption under President Franklin D. Roosevelt went largely unexamined and unchallenged; that Truman comfortably inherited this assumption, and that it also fit his inclinations and desires; and that the combat use of the bomb on Japan even came to seem both necessary and desirable. For President Harry S. Truman, the bomb could help end the war

2 Barton J. Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy, 1941-1945: An Historiographical Controversy," *Peace and Change* 3 (Spring 1974): 1-14; idem, "The Struggle over History: Defining the Hiroshima Narrative," in *Judgment at the Smithsonian*, ed. Philip Noble (New York, 1991); J. Samuel Walker, "The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update," in this volume.

3 For a recent brief statement of these positions see Gar Alperovitz and Robert Messer, "Marshall, Truman, and the Decision to Drop the Bomb," *International Security* 16 (Winter 1991/92): 204-14.

on American terms, possibly avoid the dreaded invasions, punish the Japanese for Pearl Harbor and their mistreatment of POWs, conform to the desires of the American people, and also intimidate the Soviets, perhaps making them tractable in Eastern Europe.

According to this formulation, the atomic bomb might well have been used against Japan on the same days, in the same ways, even if the Bolshevik Revolution had never occurred and the Soviet Union had not existed. But the prospect of intimidating the Soviet Union added another reason, a kind of bonus, or what some would call overdetermination. In turn, the prospects of this bonus may have blocked some policymakers from reconsidering in July or early August the use of the atomic bomb; but there is no reason to conclude that such a reconsideration - had it occurred - would have produced a different policy. In short, the combat use of the A-bomb was, unfortunately, virtually inevitable. Truman's commitment to its use was, basically, the implementation of the assumption that he had inherited.⁴

III

For President Truman and his top advisers in 1945, the use of the atomic bomb was never a question. For them, the important question was how militarily to produce Japan's surrender, and sometimes what kind of surrender was likely. All had come by mid-June 1945, if not somewhat earlier, to endorse the military strategy of invading Kyushu in early November 1945. On 18 June 1945, urged by his united military advisers, Truman had approved full planning for this invasion.⁵

At that 18 June White House meeting, none had even hinted of the earlier army-navy dispute, rooted partly in bureaucratic differences and competing organizational loyalties, about how militarily

4 See Barton J. Bernstein, "Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb, 1941-1945: A Reinterpretation," *Political Science Quarterly* 90 (Spring 1975): 23-69; and Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York, 1975).

5 "Minutes of Meeting held at the White House on Monday, 18 June 1945 at 1530," Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Record Group 218, 336 Japan (2-2-45), National Archives, Washington, DC (hereafter RG 218, with filing information), and also reprinted, with some deletions, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Conference of Berlin (Potsdam)* (Washington, 1960), 1:903-10.

to produce a surrender. In 1944 and early 1945, Admiral Ernest L. King, the feisty chief of naval operations, had pushed for a siege (blockade-bombing) strategy that he hoped might obviate the need for an invasion. King had not usually opposed an invasion of Japan, but he and his subordinates, by stressing this blockade-bombing strategy and linking it to assaults elsewhere, proposed various plans that would delay the invasion, provide more time for the siege strategy to strangle and pummel Japan, and thus, they hoped, produce a surrender without invasion. To General George C. Marshall, army chief of staff, and his top aides, King's strategy was dangerous and wasteful. It would divert resources, involve unnecessary military campaigns, and delay the desired surrender of Japan. To Marshall and his advisers, the necessary strategy was invasion in late 1945 conducted while both bombing and the blockade also operated against Japan. In Marshall's conception, unlike King's, there was no need for substantial assaults in China, Korea, or elsewhere, after completing the Okinawa campaign, before directing the operation against Kyushu.⁶

By the spring of 1945, Marshall's counsel was triumphing among the military chiefs, and the navy was beginning to endorse his invasion strategy. In late April 1945, various high-level military planning committees, representing both the navy and army, had concluded that the invasion strategy was most likely "to accomplish unconditional surrender or ultimate defeat" of Japan.⁷

Though only about two months in the presidency, Truman knew that he would have to make the decision on how to conduct the war against Japan. Obviously a commitment to an autumn 1945 invasion could always be reversed before the actual attack, but a commitment not to invade, even if changed at a later date, would delay preparation and the invasion itself. Worried by such implica-

6 Department of Defense, *The Entry of the Soviet Union into the War against Japan: Military Plans, 1941-1945* (Washington, 1955), 36-68; Grace Person Hayes, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II: The War against Japan* (Annapolis, 1982), 603-701; John Ray Skates, *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb* (Columbia, SC, 1994), 18-47; Charles E. Brower, "The Debate over Final Strategy for the Defeat of Japan, 1943-1945," *Joint Perspectives* 2 (Spring 1982): 72-80; and idem, "Sophisticated Strategist: General George A. Lincoln and the Defeat of Japan, 1944-45," *Diplomatic History* 15 (Summer 1991): 321-30.

7 Report by the Joint Staff Planners, "Pacific Strategy," JCS 924/15, 25 April 1945, RG 218, CCS 387 Pacific (1-17-43).

tions, Truman confided to his diary on 17 June 1945, "I have to decide Japanese strategy - shall we invade Japan proper or shall we bomb and blockade? That is my hardest decision to date." And probably it was, in his mind up to then, because the decision involved the likely death of many Americans, the danger of second-guessing at home, and even a public backlash. He added, tellingly, "I'll make it when I have all the facts."⁸

To help him, Admiral William Leahy, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, informed the military chiefs that the president, at their upcoming White House meeting with him on 18 June, wanted them "to discuss the details of our campaign against Japan" - the number of men and ships involved and estimates of the time required to defeat Japan, as well as the number of "the killed and wounded" in an invasion versus the losses in a siege (blockade-bombing) strategy.⁹ Leahy's directive clearly laid out the issues in a way that contrasts, sharply, with the absence of any focused, probing questions among Truman and his top advisers, on the use of the A-bomb in 1945.

In preparation for the 18 June White House meeting, the Joint War Plans Committee, including representatives from both the army and the navy, put together a consensus plan for the Joint Chiefs to present to Truman: Invade Kyushu in November 1945 "for the purpose of further reducing Japanese capabilities by containing and destroying major enemy forces and further intensifying the blockade and air bombardment in order to establish a tactical condition favorable to . . . invasion of the industrial heart of Japan through the Tokyo Plain" in Honshu in about March 1946. Skillfully, the report had never really considered the siege strategy of blockade-bombing *versus* invasion, but, as Marshall had done earlier, the planners had intimately linked these two strategies. The invasion of Kyushu, occurring *during* the conduct of the ongoing siege strategy, would also enhance the further application of that strategy - and prepare the way for a later invasion of Honshu. According to these military planners, the estimated American *fatali-*

8 Harry S. Truman Diary, 17 June 1945, Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.

9 Leahy to Joint Chiefs of Staff, 14 June 1945, Department of Defense, *Entry of the Soviet Union*, 76.

ties would range from about twenty-five thousand for the Kyushu campaign to about twenty-one thousand more if the Tokyo Plain assault of March 1946 also became necessary. The total American casualties (killed, wounded, or missing) would be about 132,500 (including 105,000 wounded) in the Kyushu operation and about an additional 87,500 (including 65,000 more wounded) in the 1946 operation.¹⁰

General Douglas MacArthur, when hastily consulted by Marshall shortly before the mid-June White House meeting, provided comforting assessments in line with those by the Joint War Plans Committee. "I believe the operation [the Kyushu invasion], MacArthur speedily cabled Washington, "provides less hazards of excessive loss than any other that has been suggested and that its decisive effect will eventually save lives by eliminating wasteful operations of nondecisive character."¹¹ MacArthur, who was eager to lead the invasion, may have given a predictable reply. His words, if crafted by Marshall himself, could not have been more supportive of Marshall's strategy. And so was the counsel from General Henry A. ("Hap") Arnold, commanding general of the army air forces, who was both Marshall's subordinate within the army and an equal member with Marshall and King of the Joint Chiefs. Whether acting partly for bureaucratic reasons and out of loyalty to Marshall or only from sincere judgment, Arnold cabled Marshall, "Continue with our present plan and occupy Kyushu to get additional bases for forty groups of heavy bombers."¹² With King also backing the plan, the high-level military support for the invasion was strong.

At the special 18 June White House meeting, General Marshall, whom Truman greatly respected, presented the united JCS case for the invasion strategy. Other strategies would be costly and not decisive, Marshall asserted, and the invasion of Kyushu, with the blockade-bombing strategy and possibly also Soviet entry or the

¹⁰ Joint War Plans Committee, "Details of the Campaign against Japan," JWPC 369/1, 15 June 1945, Records of the Army General Staff, Record Group 319, ABC Japan (3 May 1944), National Archive (hereafter RG 319, with filing information).

¹¹ MacArthur to Marshall, 18 June 1945, RG 319, ABC Japan (3 May 1944). For Admiral Chester Nimitz's casualty estimates of forty-nine thousand in the first thirty days see Skates, *The Invasion of Japan*, 79–80.

¹² H. H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York, 1949), 567; idem, "Trip to Pacific," 16 June 1945, Arnold Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

threat of such entry, might well push Japan to surrender without the Honshu invasion and "complete military defeat in the field." In words probably drafted to make Marshall's presentation very forceful, he explained in virtually a lecture to Truman, the former army captain, "It is a grim fact that there is not an easy, bloodless way to victory in war and it is the thankless task of the leaders to maintain their firm outward front which holds the resolution of subordinates. Any irresolution in the leaders may result in costly weakening and indecision in the subordinates."¹³ The message to Truman, combining themes of martial values, national sacrifice, and patriotism, was clear and pungent: Be tough and decisive, endorse the Kyushu operation, and be a true leader.

Still new to the presidency, and certainly insecure in the White House, Truman received counsel that few men, and certainly not a newcomer, could have resisted. Because the ongoing siege strategy was linked to the Kyushu operation, Truman never really received a separate assessment of simply the blockade-bombing strategy conducted *without* the Kyushu invasion. Nor apparently, despite his earlier hopes, did he press for separate probing evaluations. Although the precise estimate of American fatalities and casualties may not have been stated at this meeting, the general implication, based upon various sources, was under about 25,000 dead in the Kyushu campaign. It would be bloody, killing possibly about twice the number (13,742) of Americans slain in MacArthur's operations from 1 March 1944 to 1 May 1945, when the dead Japanese, killed at a ratio of 22 to 1, had totaled over 310,000.¹⁴

Urged on by his Joint Chiefs of Staff and by both Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson and Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, Truman endorsed planning for the Kyushu operation but reserved a decision on the larger 1946 invasion, which might also be necessary. In sanctioning the November plan, the new president had made a major decision. But he and others knew that the A-bomb, to be tested in about a month, might render the dread invasion unnecessary. That was not a firm expectation, but a hope.

¹³ FRUS: *Potsdam* 1:905.

¹⁴ "Minutes of Meeting Held at the White House . . . 18 June 1945"; William Leahy Diary, 18 June 1945, Leahy Papers, Library of Congress; James Forrestal Diary, 18 June 1945, Forrestal Papers, Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey; Henry L. Stimson Diary, 18 June 1945, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

In their discussions at this special meeting, the assembled policymakers had not sharply focused on the A-bomb; perhaps they did not even mention it.¹⁵ The bomb was untested, and there was no question that it would be used. And none saw any reason at the meeting to dwell on its likely impact on the war. That was not the subject of the meeting. The bomb was still a tightly held secret that leaders were often wary of discussing even in top-level sessions, and too little was known about its power, its psychological effects, and the results that it might produce in Japan.

Of those at this White House meeting, only Marshall, Stimson, and probably his assistant secretary, John J. McCloy, knew much about the most recent scientific estimates of the bomb. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the top-secret Los Alamos Laboratory, had recently told Secretary Stimson, in the words of the Interim Committee minutes, "that the visual effect of an atomic bombing would be tremendous. It would be equivalent to about 2,000 to 20,000 tons of TNT. It would be accompanied by a brilliant luminescence that would rise to the height of 10,000 to 20,000 feet. The neutron effect of the explosion would be dangerous to life for a radius of at least two-thirds of a mile." But, in contrast, at that same meeting, Major General Leslie Groves, commanding general of the secret A-bomb project, had warned that the bomb's effect, even if a few were dropped at the same time, "would not be sufficiently distinct from our regular Air Force bombing program."¹⁶ Such counsel did not suggest that the bomb would be the decisive weapon in the war, only that it would be a helpful weapon. How helpful was unclear in June, when the bomb was still a prospect, not a reality.

IV

In 1945, American leaders were not seeking to avoid the use of the A-bomb. Its use did not create ethical or political problems for

15 Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy later claimed that he had mentioned the A-bomb at this meeting, but his claim seems very dubious in view of the absence of any substantiating evidence in the official minutes and the diaries of Leahy, Forrester, McCloy, and Stimson. McCloy, *The Challenge to American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA, 1953), 42–3.

16 Interim Committee Minutes, 11 May 1945, paraphrasing various speakers, Records of the Manhattan Engineer District (MED), Record Group 77, Harrison-Bundy Files 100, National Archives (hereafter RG 77, with filing information).

them. Thus, they easily rejected or never considered most of the so-called alternatives to the bomb: (1) a noncombat demonstration as a dramatic warning; (2) modification of the unconditional-surrender demand and an explicit guarantee of the imperial system; (3) pursuit of Japan's peace feelers; (4) a delay of the A-bomb until well after Soviet entry into the war; and (5) reliance (without the A-bomb) on the siege strategy of heavy conventional bombing and a naval blockade. American leaders felt no incentive to pursue these strategies as *alternatives to dropping the bomb on Japan*.

Even by framing a post-Hiroshima analysis in terms of *alternatives* to the use of the A-bomb, there is some risk of distorting history by seeming – though not intending – to imply that American leaders before Hiroshima considered these various approaches, with the single exception of a noncombat demonstration, as *alternatives* to the bomb. They did not. In examining these so-called alternatives, post-Hiroshima analysts can conclude that these strategies, with various probabilities, *might* have served as alternatives to the bomb by producing a surrender before November 1945. But that is the view from a *post*-, not *pre*-, Hiroshima perspective. In the pre-Hiroshima months, when and if these strategies were considered, and delaying use of the bomb went unconsidered, they were not examined (with the exception of the noncombat demonstration) in terms of avoiding the use of the bomb but sometimes assessed within the context of avoiding the invasion. Even the siege strategy of bombing and blockade, though often linked to the November invasion, raised for policymakers the hope that it might compel a Japanese surrender before the November invasion. Put bluntly, for American leaders, avoiding the dread invasion, even if “only” twenty-five thousand Americans might die in the attack, was a major concern. Avoiding the use of the bomb was never a real concern for policymakers.

After the fact, however, avoiding the use of that weapon is properly an analytical theme for historians who seek to understand, explain, and assess the use of the A-bomb in August 1945. In conducting that historical study, they must be careful not to conflate their morality, that the bomb was a terrible weapon to be avoided, with the beliefs of American leaders before Hiroshima. Such a conflation, though tempting to some analysts, gravely mis-

understands Truman and his associates in the pre-Hiroshima world. Such a conflation greatly distorts the past and makes understanding the use of the bomb very difficult, because it leads analysts to search for some hidden ulterior motive that compelled policymakers to overcome their scruples to use the bomb. They did not have such scruples – and there is no need to look for overwhelming hidden motives. Their primary motives were not hidden.

Only had American leaders viewed the bomb as profoundly immoral, or (like the Franck Committee) had they feared the postwar consequences of the bomb's combat use, might they have sought ways not to use it. They did not regard it as profoundly immoral, they were largely inured to mass killing of the enemy, and they also looked forward to the A-bomb's international-political benefits – intimidating the Soviets. American leaders also knew that they might risk a great outcry at home if they did not use the bomb. How could they have justified spending \$2 billion on the Manhattan Project, and even diverting scarce wartime resources to that project, and then not using the A-bomb against a hated enemy – especially if the war continued past 1 November 1945 and thousands of Americans died in the invasion? Such lurking domestic-political reasons easily blended into very powerful patriotic motives and easily found additional support in personal and bureaucratic reasons for those American leaders such as Stimson and Marshall, as well as the new president, all of whom bore particular responsibility for the A-bomb project.

Despite these general explanations, there is still need to look closely at *each* of these so-called alternatives and ask two questions: Why were they not pursued *instead* of the bomb? And what might have happened if *one or more* had instead been pursued? Answers to the first question are strictly historical; but answers to the second (what might have happened if?), though greatly influenced by evidence, must necessarily remain somewhat speculative. They rest, in part, on projections of trends, actors' behavior, and events into a future that did not occur.

V

Alternative I: Noncombat Demonstration. This alternative was really only raised on two sets of occasions – at the 31 May 1945

Interim Committee lunch and then in the Franck Committee Report of 11 June, leading to its rejection by the Scientific Advisory Panel on 16 June and by the Interim Committee on 21 June. Each time, this proposal was speedily disposed of because, variously, the bomb might not work, a dud might embolden the Japanese, or Allied POWs might be moved into the demonstration area and be killed by the bomb. Because each of these risks was deeply troubling, and because there was *no strong desire* (and usually no desire) to avoid the combat use of the bomb, the alternative of a noncombat demonstration was easily rejected.¹⁷

The noncombat demonstration alternative was proposed, and normally judged, in connection with the idea of an advance warning about the bomb. But on two or possibly three occasions, American advisers – General Marshall on 29 May,¹⁸ Undersecretary of the Navy Ralph Bard on 27 June,¹⁹ and maybe Assistant Secretary of War McCloy nine days earlier²⁰ – proposed a warning without any subsequent demonstration. That tactic, to be accepted, would have required at minimum the support of Secretary of War Stimson, who never expressed any interest in an advance warning. Instead, he thought of the bomb's deadly *use* as a warning to Japan of the increasing destruction that would ensue if Japanese leaders did not surrender.

Even after the dramatic Trinity test of 16 July 1945, when the plutonium bomb was detonated with alarming effects, no policymaker or top-level science adviser reconsidered and suggested a noncombat demonstration. Not even physicist Ernest O. Lawrence, who had raised the possibility on 31 May at lunch, or his colleague,

17 On the 31 May meeting see Ernest O. Lawrence to Karl Darrow, 18 August 1945, Lawrence Papers, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California; and Arthur Holly Compton, *Atomic Quest: A Personal Narrative* (New York, 1956), 238–9. On the fate of the Franck petition see Scientific Advisory Panel (by Oppenheimer) to George Harrison, 16 June 1945, RG 77, Harrison-Bundy Files 76; Oppenheimer, in United States Atomic Energy Commission, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer: Transcript of Hearing before Personnel Security Board* (Washington, 1954), 34; and Interim Committee Minutes, 21 June 1945, RG 77, Harrison-Bundy Files 100.

18 McCloy, "Memorandum of Conversation with General Marshall," 29 May 1945, Records of the Secretary of War, Record Group 107, Safe File, National Archives.

19 Bard, "Memorandum on the Use of the S-1 Bomb," 27 June 1945, RG 77, Harrison-Bundy Files 77.

20 For grave doubts about McCloy's later claims about his role in this meeting see Barton J. Bernstein, "Seizing the Contested Terrain of Early Nuclear History: Stimson, Cointerim, and Their Allies Explain the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Diplomatic History* 17 (Winter 1993): 62 and note 105.

Arthur H. Compton, who may also have suggested such a possibility, was inclined to urge reconsideration. Perhaps even for these scientists the momentum of the project was so great, and their earlier advice of mid-June against a demonstration seemed so fixed, that they felt blocked, psychologically and bureaucratically, from raising the prospect again. Had they done so, with Truman and his top advisers already at Potsdam and comfortably committed to using the bomb, it is highly unlikely that doubts and possibilities raised by one or two of these scientists, or even by the entire four-man Scientific Advisory Panel, would have provoked any serious reexamination of assumptions, and conclusions, by the policymakers themselves.

At Potsdam, where Truman received the dramatic news of the Trinity test, he wrote in his diary, "We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his famous Ark." He marveled that "the explosion was visible for more than 200 miles and audible for 40 miles and more." Savoring the bomb's great power, he felt emboldened at the Potsdam Conference and was not seeking to avoid using this new weapon.²¹

In retrospect, given what we now know of the strong opposition among the "militarists" in the Japanese government even after two atomic bombings and Soviet entry, it is difficult to believe that a noncombat demonstration, even if preceded by a warning, would have produced a surrender before 1 November 1945 and the likely invasion of Kyushu. At best, the probabilities seem slight — maybe 5 or 10 percent. And the likelihood is even skimpier of a warning, without such a demonstration, being successful.²²

VI

Alternative II: Modification of Unconditional Surrender and Guarantee of the Emperor. Some American leaders, most notably Undersecretary of State Joseph Grew and Secretary of War Stimson, pleaded for this strategy — not as an alternative to the A-bomb, but

²¹ Truman, "Potsdam Diary," 25 July 1945, Truman Library.

²² Such arithmetic estimates should not be taken literally but as rough estimates. Because words such as "slight" or "skimp" or "small" are susceptible to a wide range of interpretation, and misinterpretation, I have chosen the unusual, but useful, tactic of offering arithmetic estimates in some cases in order to minimize misinterpretation.

rather as a way, they hoped, of avoiding the invasion. Grew did not even know of the bomb, and Stimson hoped that a guarantee of the emperor, *together* with the A-bomb and heavy conventional bombing, as well as the blockade, might produce a surrender before 1 November.²³ Grew and Stimson lost on the guarantee because Truman and James F. Byrnes, the new secretary of state, feared a political backlash in America, where Hirohito was likened to Hitler and judged a war criminal, and because Truman and Byrnes feared that such modified surrender terms might also embolden the Japanese to fight on for better terms.²⁴

Some analysts have argued that maintenance of the imperial system was the *only* issue blocking a Japanese surrender in late July or early August (before the A-bomb), and that American leaders knew this or should have known it.²⁵ Such an interpretation of the Japanese position is ill-founded. The Japanese government was badly split both on how and whether to end the war, and even the Japanese "peace" forces were unsure, unsteady, and uncertain.

In June and July, despite divisions within their government, Japanese leaders agreed on the desirability of trying to persuade the Soviets, who had recently announced their intention to end their neutrality pact with Japan, from entering the war on the American side. Japan made vague offers to the Soviets for negotiations, stressed Japan's desire to maintain friendly relations, and promised to send Prince Fumimaro Konoe, a former premier, to Moscow to meet with the Soviets. Wary of Japan's purposes, the Soviet government complained on 18 July, for example, that Japan had not offered specific proposals or explained Prince Konoe's mission. Matching Japanese vagueness and delay with similar tactics, the Soviets easily dragged out the preliminary negotiations.²⁶ It was a "cat and mouse" game.

²³ Joseph Grew to Truman, 28 May 1945, Grew Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Stimson to Truman, "Proposed Plan for Japan," 2 July 1945, in Stimson Diary, and Stimson Diary, 18 and 19 July 1945, and Stimson to Truman, 20 July 1945, Stimson Papers, Yale University.

²⁴ Cordell Hull to Grew to Byrnes, 16 July 1945, and reply, 17 July 1945, in *FRUS: Potsdam* 2:1267–78.

²⁵ Alperovitz and Messer, "Marshall, Truman, and the Decision to Drop the Bomb," 207–9.

²⁶ Lozovsky to Jacob Malik, 18 July 1945. See also V. M. Molotov to Malik, 8 July 1945, and Malik to Molotov, 13 July 1945, in "Attempts to Tilt the Sand-Glass," *Vestnik* (August 1990): 71–2, called to my attention by David Holloway.

What emerges from these cables, as well as from a larger study of the Japanese government at that time, is a complicated picture: All Japanese leaders wanted to prevent Soviet entry into the war; some leaders wanted a Japanese surrender; all agreed that continuation of the emperor was an essential condition for peace; the Japanese government was divided on the other necessary terms of that peace; some military leaders wanted to hold out for at least three additional terms (no postwar occupation, self-disarmament, and conduct of their own war-crime trials); these military leaders sometimes spoke of fighting on and thus increasing the toll in lives to secure good terms; and the peace forces were weak, fearful of a military coup, sometimes divided, often compelled to be oblique about their intentions, and never prepared boldly and clearly to push for surrender. The formal leader of the Japanese government, Admiral Baron Kantaro Suzuki, the premier, was often wavering in his quest for peace.³¹

The Japanese army, by withdrawing its representative from the cabinet, could have destroyed any move toward surrender. The militarists wanted honor, which meant far more than just a guarantee of the imperial system. "I was unable to keep the military from insisting," Togo recalled, "that they were not beaten, that they could fight another battle, and that they did not want to end the war until they had staged one last campaign." Even after Soviet entry into the war and the first atomic bombing, as Togo later reported, the army leaders still wanted one more campaign. When Togo "asked whether or not they believed they could ward off an invasion of the homeland, . . . the army chief of staff [General Korechika Anami] replied that, if we were lucky, we could repulse the invaders before they landed, but that all he could say with assurance was that we could destroy the major part of the invading army."³²

interrogations, usually placed the emperor in the best light — he was responsible for the good, never the bad — and thus there is additional reason to doubt the survey's conclusion. For a far more critical interpretation of Hirohito's actions and influence see Herbert P. Bix, "Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," in this volume.

31 "Statements" of Togo #50304, Koichi Kido #62131 and #61541, Sumihara Ikada #54479, and Masao Yoshizumi #54484; *Kido Koichi Nikki*, 21 June–9 August 1945, translated copy courtesy of Robert Butow; USSBS, "Interrogation of Premier Baron Suzuki," 26 December 1945, Records of USSBS.

32 "Statements" of Togo #50304.

A careful reading of the available Japanese sources (especially the cables between Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo in Tokyo and Ambassador Naotake Sato in Moscow) for late July and early August reveals that the Japanese Foreign Office did not believe that maintenance of the imperial system was the *only* sticking point. In fact, in the weeks before Hiroshima, the Japanese foreign minister was unprepared even to specify peace terms to his own ambassador in Moscow, despite the fact that he was directed to approach the Soviets to serve as intermediaries in peace negotiations. On 27 July, Sato warned Togo, "It is absolutely impossible to cause the Soviet government to make a move with such a noncommittal attitude on our part."²⁷ The next day, Sato asked some tough questions: Would Japan accept demilitarization and free Korea? On 2 August, Togo informed Sato, "It is difficult to decide on concrete peace conditions here [in Tokyo] all at once. . . . We are exerting ourselves to collect the views of all quarters on the matter of concrete terms." Whether intended or not, that sounded like a strategy of delay, and certainly not a rush toward peace.²⁸

And consider Sato's reply of 3 August. He admonished Foreign Minister Togo, "So long as we propose sending a Special Envoy (to Moscow) without at the same time having a concrete plan for ending the war . . . the Russians will politely refuse to receive (him and we are wasting valuable time while Japan is being destroyed)."²⁹ Despite Sato's admonitions and pleas, the best that the foreign minister would offer, up to the Hiroshima bombing, was the plan of sending an envoy to Moscow who would bear terms. But those terms had not yet been defined.³⁰

27 Sato to Togo, 27 and 28 July 1945, FRUS: Potsdam 2:1291, 1294–5.

28 Togo to Sato, 2 August 1945, in No. 1225, 2 August 1945, Magic-Diplomatic Summary, Records of the National Security Agency, Magic Files, Record Group 457, National Archives.

29 Sato to Togo, 3 August 1945, in No. 1228, 5 August 1945, Magic-Diplomatic Summary, RG 457.

30 According to the USSBS, Prince Konoe later claimed that "he received direct and secret instructions from the Emperor to secure peace at any price, notwithstanding its severity." USSBS, *Japan's Struggle to End the War* (Washington, 1946), 44. In 1949, Togo obliquely challenged that claim. U.S. Army, Far East Command, Military History Section, "Statements of Japanese on World War II," Modern Military Records Branch, National Archives (hereafter "Statements"), "Statements": Shigenori Togo #50304. Strangely, the survey's summary of Konoe's testimony does not jibe with the key transcript, "Interrogation of Prince Konoye," 9 November 1945, in Records of the USSBS, Record Group 243. National Archives. Most Japanese officials after the war, in

On 10 July, to stifle rumors in America, Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew declared publicly that there had been some loose Japanese peace feelers. "But in no case," he stressed, "has an appeal been made to this Government, directly or indirectly, by a person who could establish his authority to speak for the Japanese Government. . . . In no case has this Government [the United States] been presented with a statement purporting to define the basis upon which the Japanese Government would be prepared to conclude peace." He was correct that there had been nothing definite, and he revealed that many American leaders suspected that these peace feelers were designed to weaken America's commitment to the war.³⁵

In mid-July, a Captain Nishihara, the Japanese naval counselor in Bern, informed the Navy General Staff in Tokyo that Allen Dulles was interested in a "discussion" about peace. But the navy was wary and passed the matter on to the Foreign Office, which did nothing. "Such [American] schemes as this," the navy cabled Nishihara during the period of the Potsdam Conference, "really indicate what difficulties the enemy is facing." Washington decoded that message and knew that Nishihara had been ordered to withdraw from peace negotiations.³⁶ During this time, as one Japanese naval officer later recalled, "it was a taboo for . . . us to speak out about the problem of peace even if we were considering it deep in [our] heart."³⁷

On a few occasions in July, Washington did receive reports that there were peace feelers in Switzerland suggesting that a guarantee of the imperial system was the only sticking point to peace. These peace feelers were, unfortunately, usually directed by Japanese officials through non-American intermediaries, and there was no evidence that these Japanese were acting on authority from their government.³⁸ In fact, they were not. At best, they had

35 Grew statement of 10 July 1945, in Department of State press release, 10 July 1945, RG 59, 740.00119 P.W.

36 Magic Diplomatic Summary, part II, 28 July 1945.

37 Interrogation of Yoshimasa Suezawa #62051, in U.S. Army, Far East Command, Military History Section, "Interrogations of Japanese Officials in World War II," Modern Military Records Branch, National Archives.

38 Donovan to secretary of state, 16 and 18 July 1945, and Cheston to acting secretary of state, 2 August 1945, *FRUS, 1945* (Washington, 1969), 6:489-94.

Given the power of the militarists and their desire, it is *quite unlikely* – but not impossible – that an American guarantee of the imperial system would have produced a Japanese surrender before 1 November on terms acceptable to the United States.³³ Certainly, given American plans for the political reconstruction of Japan and the destruction of Japanese militarism, postwar occupation was essential – even at the price of a prolonged war. Very probably, American concessions on all *four* conditions (the emperor, postwar occupation, self-disarmament, and war trials) could have produced a speedy surrender. But that would not have been the victory that American leaders, as well as much of the public, desired. War is fought for political purposes, and World War II, as historians have come to understand, certainly had its politics.

VII

Alternative III: Pursuit of Japanese Peace Feelers. During the summer, Japanese middle-level diplomats and military attachés in Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe approached intermediaries and American officials to try to move toward a surrender. In June, one Japanese group proposed continuation of the emperor and retention of Korea and Formosa as the main terms for surrender. Allen Dulles, OSS chief in Switzerland, responded that he would not commit the United States but that it was his nation's understanding that the imperial institution would be maintained if Japan surrendered. He had no comment about a deal on Korea and Formosa. Despite Dulles's favorable response about the imperial system, these enterprising Japanese negotiators could not evoke any interest in Tokyo for their venture, and it died.³⁴

33 Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York, 1948), 629; Bernstein, "Seizing the Contested Terrain," 62-5.

34 "Statements" of Yoshikazu Fujimura #64118 and Sadatoshi Tonioka #60951. On Japanese demands see G. Edward Buxton (acting director of OSS) to secretary of state, 4 June 1945, but later Fujimura apparently retreated to request only a guarantee of the emperor. Buxton to secretary of state, 22 June 1945; both items in Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, 740.00119 P.W. See also other messages in this file indicating the lack of clarity or consistency, or both, in negotiations.

loose approval from some peace forces within the sharply divided Japanese government, but the "Magic" intercepts (America's decoding of top-secret Japanese messages) revealed that the government in Tokyo could not agree on specific terms and that the militarists in the government wanted far more than a guarantee of the emperor.³⁹

Ironically, these peace feelers, frail and indirect as they were, might have commanded serious interest in Washington, and certainly with Stimson, Forrestal, Marshall, and Grew, if American leaders had not also had access to the official, and bleak, Togo-Sato cables. These cables starkly revealed the weakness of Japan's peace forces and the indecision of Japan's government both before and after the Trinity test of mid-July 1945.

Probably not even Allen Dulles, who would make bolder claims two decades later,⁴⁰ was willing in July or early August to argue that a guarantee of the emperor was the *only* issue blocking the peace. At Potsdam, on 26 July, Dulles gave Stimson a report on the peace feelers in Switzerland, leading Stimson to record cryptically in his diary, "[Dulles] told us about something which had recently come to him with regard to Japan."⁴¹ McCloy noted, in his own diary, that Dulles had mentioned what McCloy called "tentative approaches." "I gather that there is something behind it, but just how substantial I do not know," McCloy wrote in his own diary.⁴² Apparently neither Stimson nor McCloy, each of whom was hoping for softer American peace terms in order to avoid the costly Kyushu invasion and the possible Honshu operation, took these possibilities very seriously, for there is no evidence that either man acted on them. Given that Stimson wanted softer terms in the forthcoming Potsdam Declaration of 26 July, and that he had earlier proposed an explicit guarantee of the emperor, he would certainly have seized on Dulles's report if it had seemed solid or even especially promising. It could have provided Stimson with the very arguments that he wished to use in his effort to gain the explicit

39 See, for example, Sato to Ito, 27 and 28 July 1945, *FRUS: Potsdam* 2:1291, 1294-5.

40 Allen Dulles, *The Secret Surrender* (New York, 1966), 235-6.

41 Stimson Diary, 20 July 1945.

42 John J. McCloy Diary, 20 July 1945, McCloy Papers, Amherst College Library, Amherst, Massachusetts.

guarantee of the imperial institution.⁴³ And Dulles himself, years later, acknowledged a major problem: The Japanese negotiators had lacked "clear credentials of authority."⁴⁴

About a week after meeting with Stimson and McCloy in Potsdam, Dulles passed on another report on the indirect negotiations in Switzerland. The information that he provided could not have generated optimism for American leaders: Japan's naval officials were wary of trying to act alone; Tokyo was dallying, avoiding any terms, but suggesting that the informal channels in Bern be kept open; and Japanese officials in Bern thought that they might have to push their own government in order to produce real possibilities. Dulles himself called this a "somewhat nebulous stage" in the Bern conversations.⁴⁵

Had the A-bomb not been dropped and had the informal discussions ("back channels") in Switzerland continued for a few more months, while America pummeled Japan from the air and tightened its naval strangulation, perhaps a surrender with a guarantee of the emperor could have been secured before November. But that would have required Japan's powerful militarists to give up their hope for one more battle and sharply cut back their demands for a peace settlement. There is little evidence, only slim hope, that the militarists would have shown such tractability and so redefined honor and necessity unless other events, very painful events, intervened to help, or propel, them to accede to what Emperor Hirohito on 10 August justified as a surrender "to save the nation from destruction."⁴⁶

VIII

Alternative IV: Awaiting Soviet Entry into the War. No top American leader (Truman, Marshall, Byrnes, Stimson, Leahy, Forrestal, King, or Arnold) generally saw Soviet entry into the war as likely

43 Stimson Diary, 20-7 July 1945.

44 Allen Dulles, "Notes for NBC-Television Program on Japanese Surrender Negotiations," 26 March 1965, Allen Dulles Papers, box 142, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton University.

45 Allen Dulles to General John Magruder, 1 August 1945, together with reports of 29 July and 1 August 1945, Dulles Papers, box 21.

46 Quoted from Robert J. C. Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (Stanford, 1954).

to be decisive *without* the A-bomb, before the scheduled invasion. Some analysts have cited — incorrectly, I think — two sources in order to reach a contrary conclusion: that Soviet entry was foreseen as likely to be decisive *without* the bomb.⁴⁷

Let me discuss these two sources in some detail — the minutes of the top-level White House meeting of 18 June 1945 and Truman's diary entry for 17 July 1945. First, the 18 June minutes. They include a verbatim digest of a key JCS report predicting that Japan *might* surrender "short of complete military defeat . . . when faced by . . . air bombardment and sea blockade, coupled with (2) a landing on Japan . . . , and also *perhaps* coupled with (3) the entry or threat of entry of Russia into the war." By this JCS formulation, Soviet entry *might* also be quite helpful — recall the JCS use of "perhaps." Later, in summarizing this view during the meeting, Marshall offered a more forcefully phrased statement: "the impact of Russian entry on the already hopeless Japanese may well be the decisive action leveraging them into capitulation at that time or shortly thereafter *if we land in Japan*." Note, again, that the impact of Soviet entry is stressed as important *if* the invasion occurs, not without the invasion. A Soviet invasion alone was not seen as likely to be decisive.⁴⁸ On 18 June, American military advisers saw Soviet entry as useful, but not essential. At that meeting, Admiral King stressed that "the Soviets were not indispensable and he did not think we should go as far as to beg them to come in. While the

cost of defeating Japan would be greater, there was no question . . . but that we could handle it alone."⁴⁹

There is a second important source on this matter of Soviet entry — Truman's diary entry for 17 July 1945. At Potsdam, on that day, when Stalin promised that Soviet forces would enter the war on 15 August (which, Truman knew, would almost certainly be *after* use of the A-bomb), the president penned in his diary, "Fini Japs when that [Soviet entry] comes about."⁵⁰ Some have seized upon this brief note as powerful evidence that Truman believed that Soviet entry, without the A-bomb, would produce an *immediate* or *prompt* Japanese surrender. But if Truman did believe for more than a few hours, if at all, that Soviet entry after the A-bomb would be so decisive so quickly, why did he not then greatly accelerate economic reconversion at home, since he knew that reconversion — with troubling issues of wages, prices, priorities, and possibly jobs — would be a major political problem buffering his postwar administration? He knew that his domestic economic planners, back in Washington, were assuming that the war would drag on well past mid-August. They were not rushing to get ready, at a break-neck rate, for peace in the next month or so. Yet, Truman did not direct them to accelerate planning greatly for peace.⁵¹

Truman's phrase about "Fini Japs" has to be construed by looking at his other actions, and thus by placing these arresting words in the larger context of his actions. That phrase, as interpreted in this larger context, meant that Japan might soon be defeated, but "soon" did not mean within days of Soviet entry. And his expectation of "soon" was coupled with his considerable hopes for the powerful impact of the "bomb." "I have some dynamite too," he wrote in his diary on the 17th, right after the Trinity test, and he knew that he could use this "dynamite" (the bomb) in early August — about a week before the Soviets' likely entry into the war.⁵²

49 "Minutes of Meeting Held at the White House . . . 18 June 1945."

50 Truman, "Potsdam Diary," 17 July 1945.

51 See, for example, Truman to John Snyder (OWMR director), 8 August 1945, Records of the Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion, Record Group 240, National Archives.

52 Truman, "Potsdam Diary," 17 July 1945.

47 Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, 23–5; Robert Messer, "New Evidence on Truman's Decision," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 41 (August 1985): 54–5; and Alperovitz and Messer, "Marshall, Truman, and the Decision to Drop the Bomb," 205–10.

48 "Minutes of Meeting Held at the White House . . . 18 June 1945," also printed in *FRUS, Potsdam* 1:904–5 (emphasis added). For an earlier view, one placing more weight on the impact of Soviet entry, see the study by Brig. Gen. Lincoln, 4 June 1945, quoted in Ray S. Cline, *Washington Command Post: The Operations Division* (Washington, 1951), 344, in *United States Army in World War II*. This stronger formulation, emphasizing the value of Soviet entry, was revised in mid-June in a digest-paper that Marshall presented at the 18 June White House meeting. See also G.A.L. (Lincoln) to General Norstad, 4 October 1946, George Lincoln Papers, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, called to my attention by Colonel Charles Brower IV. The importance of Soviet entry was also minimized in Joint Staff Planners, "Details of the Campaign against Japan," JCS 1388, 16 June 1945, but stressed more in CCS 643, "Estimate of the Enemy Situation," 6 July 1945, where Soviet entry was assessed as "finally convincing the Japanese of the inevitability of complete defeat" — but this estimate did not promise prompt, or speedy, surrender. Department of Defense, *The Entry of the Soviet Union into the War*, 87.

On 18 July, he went on to write in his diary, "Believe Japs will fold up before Russia comes in. I am sure that they will when Manhattan [the A-bomb] appears over their homeland."⁵³ Yet, that same day, in a letter to his wife, the president emphasized that he had "gotten what I came for — Stalin goes to war August 15 [and] we'll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won't be killed!"⁵⁴ Actually, despite his euphoric and possibly confusing comments, when they are taken together in context, the evidence is that Truman did not really expect — beyond this brief burst of enthusiasm — that one bomb or two would produce a speedy Japanese surrender. He certainly did nothing, aside from penning this lone diary entry, to indicate that he expected a surrender before 15 August 1945. Like others, he was actually surprised when Japan offered (even with one condition) to surrender on 10 August. Until then, he had assumed — as did General Leslie Groves, Marshall, Stimson, and others — that more than two A-bombs would be dropped before Japan accepted defeat and its government actually surrendered.⁵⁵

The successful Trinity test had the effect, for many American leaders, of minimizing or eliminating the value of Soviet entry into the war. Prime Minister Winston Churchill concluded at Potsdam on 23 July, "It is quite clear that the United States do not at present time desire Russian participation in the war against Japan."⁵⁶ Yet, the next day, Churchill and Truman also approved a document by their military chiefs, "Encourage Russian entry into the war against Japan."⁵⁷ To Stimson, Soviet entry no longer seemed necessary because in his judgment the primary value of their armed intervention would be to hold up the Japanese army in Manchuria, and that was already being accomplished by the presence of Soviet armies near the border. Thus, in Stimson's formulation, Soviet entry would offer little more than the Soviets had already done in aiding the American effort. Marshall seemed generally to agree,

⁵³ Truman, "Potsdam Diary," 18 July 1945.

⁵⁴ Truman to Dear Bess, 18 July 1945, Truman Papers.

⁵⁵ See, for example, the discussions summarized in Stimson Diary, 10 August 1945; Forrestal Diary, 10 August 1945; and Leahy Diary, 10 August 1945; and Marshall to Groves, 10 August 1945, printed note on Groves to Marshall, 10 August 1945, in Marshall Papers, George C. Marshall Library, Lexington, Virginia.

⁵⁶ Churchill, quoted in John Ehrman, *Grand Strategy* (London, 1956), 5:292.

⁵⁷ Combined Chiefs of Staff to Truman and Churchill, 24 July 1945, FRUS: Potsdam 2:1463.

although he also noted that the Soviets could enter when they wished and thus they could gain various advantages.⁵⁸

But American leaders did not view Soviet entry as a *substitute* for the bomb. Rather, they viewed the bomb as so powerful, and the Soviet presence in Manchuria as so militarily significant, that there was no need for actual Soviet intervention into the war. Thus, it was easy for some American leaders after the Trinity test to try to impede Soviet entry in order to stop the Soviets from grabbing parts of the Asian mainland. In the view of Byrnes, Stimson, Marshall, and presumably other American leaders, this "impeding" strategy would not delay the ending of the war and the surrender of Japan.⁵⁹ Nor were most sure that the November invasion could be averted.

In retrospect, we can conclude that Soviet entry on 15 August (without the A-bomb) might well (maybe 20–30 percent probability) have produced a surrender before 1 November.⁶⁰ But let me stress that this is a conclusion based on what we now know, not on what American leaders believed at the time. Had they closely, empathetically, and imaginatively read the intercepted and decoded Sato-Togo cables, perhaps American leaders might have anticipated the profound psychological *shock* that Soviet entry into the war produced among Japanese leaders, many of whom were hoping until that fateful day of 8 August 1945 that the Soviets might be entreated to remain outside the Pacific war. To distinguish psychological shock from military significance required subtlety and perhaps the willingness to speculate about the uneasiness

⁵⁸ Stimson Diary, 23 July 1945.

⁵⁹ On Byrnes see Forrestal Diary, 28 July 1945; and W. B.'s (Walter Brown's) Notes, 20 and 24 July 1945, Byrnes Papers, Robert Muldrow Cooper Library, Clemson University, Columbia, South Carolina. On Leahy see Leahy Diary, 24 and 29 July 1945. On Truman, W. B.'s Notes, 3 August 1945. Byrnes tried to follow a strategy of having the Chinese avoid, or delay, concessions to the Soviets partly in order to delay Soviet entry into the war, for the Soviets had made these concessions a condition of their entry. But others were unsure whether Chinese refusal would delay Soviet entry. Leahy Diary, 17 July 1945. For a slightly different view see Leahy Diary, 24 July 1945.

⁶⁰ Conclusions about the substantial impact of Soviet entry are based upon postwar statements by Japanese officials: See "Interrogation of Konoye," 9 November 1945; "Statements" of Togo #50304 and Sumihisa Ikeda #54479; and interrogation of Admiral Soemu Toyoda, in USSBS, Naval Analysis Division, *Interrogation of Japanese Officials* (Washington, 1947), 2:320. See also Shigenori Togo, *The Cause of Japan*, trans. Fumihiko Togo and Ben Bruce Blakeney (New York, 1956), 315, 16; and Toshizaku Kase, *Journey to the Pacific* (New Haven, 1950), 217.

and vulnerability of the enemy. No American leader – including Stimson, who had argued for a guarantee of the emperor – had the inclination, and perhaps the capacity, in the last weeks of July and the early days of August to engage in such analysis.

In retrospect, we can conclude that American leaders' unwillingness to delay the bomb's use and await Soviet entry, and then, if necessary, to delay the A-bombing for a longer period, may well have been a "missed opportunity." But such a possibility was not adequately understood in late July or early August. And delaying the A-bomb would have seemed a very risky, and unnecessary, gamble – far too risky for men not seeking to avoid its use.

Looking back, Henry Stimson asserted (in words possibly crafted by McGeorge Bundy), that "the dominant fact of 1945 was war, and that therefore, necessarily, the dominant objective was victory. If victory could be speeded by using the bomb, it should be used." Delay would have been both unwise and unconscionable, he assumed. In so publishing his own beliefs, and those of his 1945 associates, Stimson was subscribing to the strong American values of patriotism and of nationalism, values that emphasized the importance of saving American lives and the willingness to slay the enemy.⁶¹

IX

Alternative V: Bombing and Blockade – The Strategy of Siege without the Atomic Bomb. Probably the most likely way of achieving a Japanese surrender before November 1945 (without the A-bomb) was by continuing the siege strategy of the heavy bombing of Japanese cities – the terror-bombing and the destruction of military and industrial installations – and the strangling naval blockade, including mining operations. During the spring and summer, for American leaders, blockade and bombing had been conceptually and strategically linked in the siege strategy, and they did not argue whether bombing or blockade was more useful or whether one should receive a higher priority. These two parts of the siege strategy were seldom in competition with one another, and thus

61 Stimson and Bundy, *On Action Service*, 649.

there was no reason for sustained argument. Surely, top military leaders before the end of the war had beliefs about whether the bombing or the blockade would be more influential in the ongoing, and even escalating, siege strategy, but they left no clear record of such thinking at that time.⁶² Undoubtedly, top navy officials thought more highly of the blockade, and army air force officials rated the bombing more highly. Since bombing and blockade were conjoined in the approved siege strategy, and there was no summertime dissent, there was no need to explore likely differences, rooted in organizational and bureaucratic loyalty, that might divide military leaders in what would have been, during the war, an "academic" enterprise. When possible, they preferred agreement to disagreement. Only after the war, when glory, postwar missions and budgets, and issues of future strategy were at issue, would top military leaders, surveying the closing months of the Pacific war, argue openly, and sometimes strenuously, about whether bombing or blockade contributed most to the defeat of Japan and whether one of these means, alone, could have produced the surrender.⁶³

Even before Truman's White House meeting of 18 June with his military advisers, all had assumed that the air force, benefiting from the capture of Okinawa, would soon be significantly intensifying the conventional bombing of Japan. During the spring and summer, such an effort had never been an issue. All of the services formally agreed on its desirability, and army air force leaders, delighted to help end the war and to demonstrate the prowess of bombers, were eager to contribute to the siege strategy. By mid-July, in a report by Arnold that was endorsed by his fellow members of the Joint Chiefs, the American government planned

to achieve the disruption [by bombing] of the Japanese military, industrial, and economic systems. . . . In order to take full advantage of the incendiary attacks . . . , we expect to completely disrupt the Japanese transportation system. We estimate that this can be done with our forces

62 The blockade was greatly assisted in 1945 by B-29 mining operations, and there were some AAF-navy disputes about employing these bombers for that activity. James Cate and Wesley F. Craven, eds., *The Army Air Forces in World War II* (Chicago, 1953), 5:662–73.

63 See, for example, Curtis E. LeMay, with MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story* (Garden City, 1965), 381; Ernest J. King and Walter Muir Whitehill, *Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record* (New York, 1952), 621.

available in the month prior to the invasion of Japan. Japan, in fact, will become a nation without cities, with her transportation disrupted and will have tremendous difficulty in holding her people together for continued resistance to our terms of unconditional surrender.⁶⁴

Such words did not *promise* that the November 1945 invasion would be unnecessary, or that bombing alone would make the decisive difference. For, all understood that this bombing would occur *within* the context of the ongoing blockade, and that such linked devastation, while adding to the substance of Japan's defeat, did not automatically translate into Japan's surrender. Better than many later analysts, the Joint Chiefs well understood the gap between the conditions for defeat and the production of an actual surrender, because the chiefs knew that enemy leaders did not automatically surrender when defeat was both inevitable and possibly near.

If heavy bombing could contribute to surrender before the planned Kyushu invasion, however, and Arnold and the other Joint Chiefs hoped in mid-July that it would, they were neither assuming nor suggesting that they thought that the A-bomb was unnecessary. For Arnold, as for the other military chiefs before and even shortly after Hiroshima, heavy bombing was not a substitute – but a supplement – to the A-bomb. And the A-bomb was, in turn, for them, a supplement to heavy bombing. In their pre-Hiroshima thinking, conventional heavy bombing may even have seemed a more powerful contributor to ultimate victory than the A-bomb. Unlike Stimson, Truman, and Byrnes, the military chiefs do not seem to have dwelled, after Trinity and before Hiroshima, on the atomic bomb's great power in the war. Probably the chiefs, as is often true of military leaders, were more conservative in their thinking about this new technology.

64 "Report on Army Air Operations in the War against Japan," JCS 1421, 16 July 1945, RG 218, file CCS 381 Japan (6-16-45), box 291, and also partly excerpted in Cline, *Washington Command Post*, 346. Alperovitz, "More on Atomic Diplomacy," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 41 (December 1985): 36, reaches the strained conclusion that Arnold promised that "the war could easily be ended by September or October" (emphasis added). For dubious, oblique support from a questionable book, based possibly on some postwar interviews with air force officers, see Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey II, *No High Ground* (New York, 1960), 111. Partial support for Knebel and Bailey's statement is available in Herman Wolk to General Ira Eaker, 19 October 1974, and reply, 22 October 1975, courtesy of Herman Wolk.

After the war ended, Admiral Leahy argued that Japan could have been defeated, and propelled to surrender, before 1 November 1945 and the use of the A-bomb. He had deep bureaucratic incentives to offer such judgments in his own memoirs.⁶⁵ He may have been right; he may have been wrong. But it is worth emphasizing that none of the American chiefs ever explicitly stated, let alone argued, this case *before* Hiroshima. Until then, not even Leahy, who, alone among the group, probably ethically disliked the use of the A-bomb, had ever said that it should not be used. None had ever promised Truman, or even told one another, that heavy conventional bombing or a naval blockade, or both, would *definitely* produce Japan's surrender before 1 November 1945 and thus obviate the Kyushu invasion.⁶⁶ All wanted to avoid that terrible invasion – with possibly thirty-one thousand casualties in the first thirty days and maybe as many as twenty-five thousand killed in the battles for Kyushu – and certainly the large invasion of about 1 March 1946.

Indeed, Arnold actually expected that the November invasion would be necessary in order to gain air bases on Kyushu to bomb other parts of Japan. In mid-June, he had so informed the other Joint Chiefs of his analysis, and he had even sent a deputy to the 18 June White House meeting to present this argument.⁶⁷ In mid-July, when crafting a report endorsed by his fellow chiefs, Arnold had stressed, again, that the Kyushu operation had great value for the continued bombing of Japan. The establishment of air bases in Kyushu, Arnold explained, would mean that "the full destructive power of the air force will be brought against the remaining elements of the Japanese war machine."⁶⁸

Amid the strangling naval blockade, and without the A-bomb, perhaps the heavy bombing of Japanese cities in August, September, and October 1945 would have forced Japan to surrender before

65 William D. Leahy, *I Was There: The Personal Story of the Chief of Staff to Presidents Roosevelt and Truman Based on His Notes and Diaries Made at the Time* (New York, 1950), 440–1. There is no available evidence, in Leahy's papers and diaries or in any other source, that he had ever given such advice before Hiroshima.

66 For a different, virtually opposite, view see Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, esp. 285. Arnold, "Trip to the Pacific," 16 June 1945; "Minutes of Meeting Held at the White House . . . 18 June 1945."

67 Arnold in "Report on Army Air Operations in the War against Japan," JCS 1421, 16 July 1945.

November. For months before Hiroshima, the air force had been pounding many of Japan's cities. By mid-July, already, more than half the built-up areas of Tokyo and Kobe, and at least a fifth of the built-up areas of Osaka, Yokohama, and Nagoya, among others, had been destroyed. By early August, over sixty cities had been heavily bombed, probably about six hundred thousand had been killed and another million injured, and over eight million had been evacuated from the cities. Indeed, only because of Washington's special order were a few cities — Hiroshima, Kokura, Nagasaki, and Niigata — largely spared from conventional bombing and reserved for the atomic bomb. By the summer, both Japanese production and morale had fallen, and fear often disrupted life. Japan was near defeat.⁶⁹

But the question remains, to be asked even after nearly a half-century, whether Japan's military leaders would have been willing to surrender, or whether they would have insisted on fighting at Kyushu and perhaps at Honshu, too? The movement from recognizing defeat to offering surrender can be jagged, and the process can be filled with self-deception, the quest for glory, and the faith in hope. Surrender, for many leaders, can be the most devastating failure — an event to be resisted at great cost to self and others.

In 1946, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey concluded (in an often-quoted sentence), "it is the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, 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." Those who have relied heavily on this report have usually overlooked its slight hedge ("in all probability") and also some very disconcerting contrary evidence.⁷⁰

After the war, some Japanese leaders testified on this issue. Prince Fumimaro Konoe told the Bombing Survey, in answering an

⁶⁹ USSBS, *The Effects of Strategic Bombing on Japanese Morale* (Washington, 1947), 33–40; idem, *Summary Report (Pacific War)* (Washington, 1946), 23–4.

⁷⁰ Chairman's Office, USSBS, *Japan's Struggle to End the War*, 45. The strongest support for this conclusion from a high-level Japanese leader came from Koichi Kido, Privy Seal, in his interrogation of 10 November 1945 by the survey, but he was also very eager to please his questioners and seemed rather slippery. "Interrogation of Kido," Records of the USSBS.

explicit question, that, if the atomic bomb had not been dropped, "the war probably . . . would have lasted all this year [1945]."⁷¹ Admiral Baron Kantaro Suzuki, Japan's premier during the empire's last days, though never directly confronting the question, gave similar testimony to American interrogators after the war. He stressed the Japanese military's plans, and hopes, for a last battle. "The Supreme War Council [The Big Six]," he told the survey, "had proceeded with the one plan of fighting a decisive battle at the landing point and was making every possible preparation to meet such a landing. They proceeded with that plan until the atomic bomb was dropped."⁷² After the survey's published 1946 report, former Foreign Minister Togo informed American questioners that the bomb had made a powerful difference. On the 7th, more than a day before Soviet entry, Togo met with the emperor, who (in Togo's later words) "indicated clearly that the enemy's new weapon made it impossible to go on fighting [and he] told me to try to end the war immediately." In Togo's recollection of events, the bomb had propelled the emperor to push more ardently for peace.⁷³

After the war, Admiral King publicly argued that a naval blockade would have produced a Japanese surrender, and thus implied that the atomic bombing had been unnecessary. But he did not claim success by 1 November, only an ultimate triumph. A loyal navy man, he questioned after the war — as have few analysts — whether in the spring and summer the army should have insisted upon an invasion. He chose not to admit that he had never argued against the Kyushu invasion in front of Truman and that he had actually seemed to endorse the operation itself, not just planning for it.⁷⁴

Had American leaders been willing to risk prolonging the war, there is no question that a naval blockade, as King later wrote, "would in the course of time, have starved the Japanese into sub-

⁷¹ "Interrogation of Konoye," 9 November 1945.

⁷² "Interrogation of Suzuki," 26 December 1945.

⁷³ "Statement" of Togo #50304, Togo, *Cause of Japan*, 315–16, places this meeting on the 8th and is less emphatic about the emperor's wishes.

⁷⁴ King and Whitehill, *Admiral King*, 621. On the 18 June meeting see "Minutes of Meeting Held at the White House . . . 18 June 1945"; Leahy Diary, 18 June 1945; Stimson Diary, 18 June 1945; Forrestal Diary, 18 June 1945.

mission through lack of oil, rice, medicine, and other materials.⁷⁵ By mid-1945, largely because of American naval operations, Japan's merchant fleet had been reduced to about 10 percent of its prewar size, its oil supplies cut to under 3 percent of the prewar peak, most imports of foodstuffs, oil, and other materials blocked, and Japan's economy was in shambles. Food supplies had perilously dwindled, with sharp cuts in food rations in 1944 and again in 1945. The 1945 rice crop had been a disaster, and imports were virtually impossible.⁷⁶ In June 1945, a then-secret Japanese analysis for the cabinet warned, "The food situation has grown worse and a crisis will be reached at the end of this year. The people will have to get along on an absolute minimum of rice and salt required for subsistence."⁷⁷

That bleak and rather accurate estimate was, of course, not available to American leaders. During the last months of war, Marshall's plans for the invasion, endorsed by Truman and his other military advisers, had easily triumphed. None ever argued in the summer for a prolonged blockade and no invasion in late 1945 or even early 1946. Truman, despite his uneasiness in mid-June 1945 about the invasion plan, was easily diverted from seriously considering postponement of the invasion and trying to "starve out" the Japanese in order to save American lives. Had he received different counsel from his military advisers, or had they split in June 1945 as they had at times in 1944, the president might have dwelled on the siege strategy of blockade and bombing without invasion. Still, such a strategy would have easily included for him, and for his advisers, the use of the atomic bomb.

The siege strategy (without the A-bomb) might have produced the desired Japanese surrender by 1 November. The probabilities are not very high (maybe 25–30 percent), because the crucial problems, in this counterfactual history, are whether the peace forces would have pushed ardently for surrender, whether the emperor would have intervened if his government had been divided, whether the militarists would have yielded to his sense of necessity, and whether

⁷⁵ King and Whitehill, *Admiral King*, 621 (emphasis added).

⁷⁶ Jerome B. Cohen, *Japan's Economy in War and Reconstruction* (Minneapolis, 1949), 104–5, 109, 144, 368–70.

⁷⁷ "Survey of National Resources as of 1–10 June 1945," in *Japan's Struggle to End the War*, appendix, vii–viii.

the government would have accepted defeat and moved to surrender. That process would have involved many contingencies and have required the Japanese government to deal directly with the United States.

X

Single and Multiple Alternatives. There is good reason to have serious doubts that any single "alternative" – a noncombat demonstration, guaranteeing the emperor, pursuing peace feelers, awaiting Soviet entry, or continuing heavy conventional bombing and the blockade – would *alone* have produced surrender before November without the use of the A-bomb. But it does seem very likely, though certainly not definite, that a synergistic combination of guaranteeing the emperor, awaiting Soviet entry, and continuing the siege strategy would have ended the war in time to avoid the November invasion. And quite possibly Soviet entry amid the strangling blockade and the heavy bombing of cities could have accomplished that goal without dropping the atomic bomb.

There was, then, more probably than not, a missed opportunity to end the war without the A-bomb and without the November invasion. And it is virtually definite, had the Kyushu invasion occurred with these other strategies, and without the A-bomb, that Japan would have surrendered well before the March 1946 invasion. Such conclusions, though emerging from the uneasy realm of counterfactual history, do place in question the contention that the atomic bomb was necessary. These conclusions challenge that concept of "necessity" and require that its meanings be carefully spelled out, that the implied costs be carefully expressed and analyzed, and that scholars and laypeople, in discussing these issues, carefully distinguish between what now seems known, what was known or believed before Hiroshima, and whether the pre-Hiroshima processes of decision making and analysis were adequate, on ethical and international-political grounds, to the important actions being taken.

To dwell upon the process of decision making alone would be unduly mechanistic, but it is certainly important to recognize that the A-bomb decision, contrary to some contentions, was not "care-

fully considered" and that the movement toward the November invasion, despite Truman's desires, was not fully and critically examined in his presence. He never sought "carefully" to consider the use of the A-bomb, nor was there any need for him to hold a meeting with advisers on whether it should be used.⁷⁸ The process that he and they all assumed that it would be used.⁷⁸ The process that he followed implemented that assumption. The question of the invasion was far more troubling to him. Had Japan not surrendered by the summer or early autumn, probably Truman would have returned to another session with his military advisers to discuss the necessity for the November invasion. At such a meeting, perhaps they would have served him better than they did in mid-June, at the special White House session, where they smoothed over earlier differences and thus presented the siege strategy with the Kyushu invasion of November as the only reasonable strategy.

XI

On 9 August 1945, three days after the Hiroshima bomb, in implementing the orders to use bombs "as made ready,"⁷⁹ the air force dropped the second atomic bomb, killing about thirty-five to eighty thousand at Nagasaki. This bomb was almost definitely unnecessary. Without that bombing, Japan would have surrendered — very probably on the 10th. Amid the continuing blockade and the heavy conventional bombing, the powerful hammerlike blows of the Hiroshima weapon on the 6th and Soviet entry on the 8th had emboldened the peace forces in the Japanese government to try to end the war with only the single condition of the guarantee of the emperor. The day before the Nagasaki bombing, the emperor had agreed to intervene in deliberations, if necessary, to end the war with that one condition.⁸⁰ "We must put an end to the war as speedily as possible."

78 Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Harper's Magazine* 194 (February 1947): 98–101; Bernstein, "Seizing the Contested Terrain," 45–72. For great doubts about whether such a meeting was held see Barton J. Bernstein, "Ike and Hiroshima: Did He Oppose It?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10 (September 1987): 378–9.

79 General Thomas Handy to General Carl Spaatz, 25 July 1945, RG 77, Harrison-Bundy Files 64.

80 Barton J. Bernstein, "Doomsday II," *New York Times Magazine*, 27 July 1975, 7, 21ff.; Sherwin, *World Destroyed*, 233–6.

ble," he had instructed the Lord Privy Seal Koichi Kido.⁸¹ Undoubtedly, Hirohito would have intervened without the Nagasaki bombing to plead, successfully, for Japan's surrender.

Indeed, according to some later reports, the emperor would have intervened without both the second bomb and Soviet entry. Undoubtedly, that Soviet action on the 8th made it easier for the emperor to break precedent and try to shape policy, and certainly the Soviet attack smashed many lingering hopes in the cabinet that had allowed the peace forces to dawdle until the 8th and 9th.⁸²

In Washington, because no one had foreseen such an early Japanese surrender, no one had suggested delaying before using a second atomic bomb. Even after the Hiroshima bomb, top officials in Washington were unsure how long the war might continue and thus whether to risk cutting back military procurement contracts.⁸³ On the 8th, Secretary of the Navy Forrestal, apparently expecting that the November invasion would occur, worried about which American commander would be chosen for "the final operations against Japan in the Pacific."⁸⁴ That same day, Truman, having just returned from Potsdam, directed a key official to have a reconversion plan by the end of August.⁸⁵ On the 9th, recording his own uncertainty, Stimson wrote in his diary, "the bomb and the entrance of the Russians into the war will certainly have an effect on hastening the victory. But just how much that effect is on how long and how many men we will have to keep to accomplish that victory, it is impossible to determine."⁸⁶

In the Pacific, because bad weather had been forecast for a few days after the 9th, scientists had rushed to prepare the plutonium

81 "Statements" of Kido #61541 and #61476.

82 For evidence, often within the assumed context of the bombing and blockade, about the decisive impact of the first A-bomb on the emperor and others see "Statements" of Kido #61541 and #61476 and Togo #50304; Togo, *Cause of Japan*, 313–14; "Interrogation of Suzuki"; and Far East Command, G-2 Historical Section, "Interrogation of Hisatsune Sakomizu," 3 May 1949, Modern Military Records Branch, National Archives. Some others mentioned both the first A-bomb and Soviet entry in such a way that it is hard to assess their sense of the comparative impact of each event. See, for example, "Interrogation of Konoye"; Toyoda in USSBS, *Interrogation*, II, 320; Kase, *Journey*, 320; and "Statements" of Ikeda #45479.

83 Robert P. Patterson (undersecretary of war) to George Harrison, 2 August 1945, and Harrison to Patterson, 8 August 1945, RG 77, Harrison-Bundy Files 8.

84 Forrestal to Truman, 8 August 1945, Forrestal Diary.

85 Truman to John Snyder, 8 August 1945, OWMR Records.

86 Stimson Diary, 9 August 1945.

weapon for prompt dropping on a Japanese city. The bomb's use was automatic – not because some wanted to test this kind of bomb on a city but because no one had seen any reason to delay it. No one had foreseen the great psychological impact of the first bomb on Japan, and there was no available evidence, beyond the inner circles of Japan's government, that the peace forces had been galvanized toward action even before the Nagasaki bomb.⁸⁷

But even the two bombs, sandwiched around Soviet entry into the war, did not alter the expressed positions of leading militarists in the Japanese government – General Korechika Anami, the minister of war (army); General Yoshiji Umezu, army chief of staff; and Admiral Soemu Toyoda, navy chief of staff. All three still wanted to hold out for maintenance of the imperial system and three other conditions (no postwar occupation, self-disarmament, and conduct of their own war trials). They were, as historian Robert Butow remarked, “true samurai.”⁸⁸

War Minister Anami, the most powerful of the three militarists, continued to look forward to a last battle unless America yielded and granted all four conditions. An associate later characterized Anami's beliefs: “Although Japan's victory in the decisive battle of the homeland is not certain, there is still some possibility. Therefore, the battle should be fought on the homeland at least once with a resolution to seek a way out of a desperate situation.”⁸⁹

Only after the emperor broke precedent and pleaded in the early hours of the 10th for peace with the single condition of a guarantee of the imperial system did Anami and the other two military leaders accept the cabinet majority's position.⁹⁰ Without Hirohito's crucial intercession, the militarists would probably not have yielded. The war would have dragged on – perhaps even into the bloody battle, scheduled by America to begin in November, that Anami, in his quest for honor, desired for himself, for the army that he loved, and for the polity that he cherished.

87 Bernstein, “Doomsday II”; Sherwin, *World Destroyed*, 233–6.

88 “Statements” of Togo #50134 and Toyoda #61340 and #57670; Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, 160–1, who also notes some occasional relaxation of the condition of no occupation to allow postwar occupation of all of Japan except Tokyo.

89 “Statements” of Masao Yoshizumi #54484 (source of quotation) and stronger statement in #59277.

90 On Anami see “Statements” of Yoshizumi #54484 and #59277; Makato Tsukamoto #59466; Saburo Hayashi #1436; and Seimo Sakonji #58226.

Truman's administration was unprepared for Japan's peace offer on 10 August. Policymakers had not expected such a speedy response, nor had they even hoped for it. So little did Stimson anticipate that anything significant was likely to happen that week that he was actually leaving for a much-needed vacation when Japan's message arrived. He dashed to the White House to join the important discussion on whether the air force should continue its conventional bombing and use more atomic bombs.⁹¹

That day, Truman sharply redefined his policy on the atomic bomb. No longer would its use be automatic. He actually wanted to avoid dropping another one. As he told his cabinet (in Henry Wallace's words): “The thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible. He didn't like the idea of killing ‘all those kids.’” For the first time, Truman admitted that the A-bombs had killed many innocent noncombatants.⁹² But Truman chose to continue the heavy conventional bombing of Japanese cities, which would kill thousands of others.

Unlike Stimson,⁹³ who had earlier agonized about the mass bombing of cities, Truman neither before nor after Hiroshima and Nagasaki seemed worried about such mass killings by conventional means. But before the Hiroshima bombing, in what can only be interpreted as self-deception, he had managed not to know that the A-bombs would slay many noncombatants. At Potsdam, the president, after a meeting with Stimson, had written in his diary that they had agreed that the bomb would be used “so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare [are not]. The target will be a purely military one.” After discussing the A-bomb with Stimson, President Truman, unless engaging in a form of self-deception, could not have believed his own diary words.⁹⁴

91 Stimson Diary, 10 August 1945. His diary of 9 August did mention hopes for a surrender before the use of the third bomb, which could have been used in about ten days, but his diary for 10 August indicates how sincerely surprised he was by Japan's decision at that time.

92 Henry A. Wallace Diary, 10 August 1945, Wallace Papers, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

93 Stimson Diary, 6 June and 5 March 1945; Barton J. Bernstein, “An Analysis of ‘Two Cultures’: Writing about the Making and the Using of the Atomic Bombs,” *Public Historian* 12 (Spring 1990): 96–9.

94 Truman, “Potsdam Diary,” 25 July 1945.

Briefly facing the reality of the A-bomb's great destruction, including the killing of noncombatants, Truman was still unwilling to accede, fully and unequivocally, to the single Japanese condition – even though agreement would end the war promptly and, as Stimson stressed, thus block Soviet claims for any role in the postwar occupation of Japan. Byrnes, earlier so worried about the Soviets grabbing territory on the Asian mainland, was now willing to risk prolonging the war in order to avoid granting the imperial system. The administration's guarantee of the emperor, Byrnes warned, could mean the “crucifixion of the President” at home. Byrnes believed that Americans would not tolerate Hirohito and the throne. The secretary of state was willing to place domestic politics above his own anti-Soviet concerns. For him, international considerations were secondary.⁹⁵

The dispute on the 10th at the White House ended in an uneasy compromise, a kind of middle way between Byrnes and Stimson. Advisers worked out an intentionally ambiguous response that neither accepted nor rejected Japan's single condition.⁹⁶ That reply briefly split the fragile peace coalition in Japan, briefly pushed the premier into the militarists' camp, emboldened the militarists to fight on, propelled them again to insist upon their other three conditions, and required the emperor to intervene once more.⁹⁷

Before Hirohito's intervention, some high-ranking military men below the cabinet level ardently pleaded for continuing the war. Vice Chief of the Naval Staff Onishi, planner of the kamikaze attacks, argued, “we would never be defeated if we were prepared to sacrifice 20,000,000 lives in a ‘special attack’ effort.”⁹⁸ Such suicidal contentions, linking national honor and eternal glory, em-

95: On the meeting see Stimson Diary, 10 August 1945; Leahy Diary, 10 August 1945; Forrestal Diary, 10 August 1945; and Byrnes quoted in W. B.'s Notes, 10 August 1945. For Truman's earlier political fears about modifying the unconditional surrender demand see “Minutes of Meeting Held at the White House . . . 18 June 1945.” These events are treated in Barton J. Bernstein, “The Perils and Politics of Surrender: Ending the War with Japan and Avoiding the Third Atomic Bomb,” *Pacific Historical Review* 46 (February 1977): 1–12.

96: The U.S. reply is reprinted in Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, 245.

97: Bernstein, “Perils and Politics of Surrender,” 17–23.

98: Onishi is paraphrased in “Statements” of Togo #50304. For a slightly different version see Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, 205. For sentiments similar to Onishi's see “Interrogation of Lt. Gen. Kawabe” (deputy chief, Imperial General Headquarters), Records of the USSBS.

phasized to Umezu, Toyoda, and Anami the dangerous passions among their underlings and the perils of seeking a surrender in Japan in mid-August.

Even after Hirohito's dramatic intervention on the 14th for peace, some Japanese militarists almost staged a successful coup. Had they succeeded, President Truman, with a third A-bomb that could be at Tinian and ready for use in about a week, would have soon faced a painful decision – whether to use the bomb, as Americans would have expected, or whether instead to rely upon conventional warfare and hope that the November invasion would not be necessary. Most likely, Truman would have chosen to use the third atomic bomb.⁹⁹

Truman never had to face that decision because two Japanese leaders, War Minister Anami and Chief of Staff Umezu, intervened to block the coup and thus maintained the government. The more powerful of the two was Anami. Loyal to the emperor, General Anami acceded to Hirohito's tearful plea for peace through surrender. But had Anami chosen instead to resign from the cabinet, it would have fallen and the speedy peace would have been lost. Anami stayed in the cabinet and deftly prevented a coup by calling on the army to be loyal to him, to its sense of honor, and to the emperor. Had he instead supported the coup and joined it, he would have taken powerful sections of the army with him. He was the keystone in the fragile arch that could lead to a prompt peace or a prolonged war.¹⁰⁰ Had Anami chosen differently, analysts might well be discussing the use of the third atomic bomb, the extension of the war, and perhaps even the November invasion of Kyushu.

Concern with the use of the two A-bombs requires return to an important but generally neglected theme: Truman on the 10th had felt a moral distinction between the atomic bomb and heavy conventional bombing. Though feeling moral revulsion about the future use of the A-bomb, he remained willing to bomb Japanese cities with high explosives and incendiaries. Perhaps at least

99: Mr. Balfour to Foreign Office, 14 August 1945, F.O. 800/461, Public Record Office, Kew, United Kingdom.

100: Bernstein, “Perils and Politics of Surrender,” 18–22; Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, 196–209.

twenty thousand died in those conventional attacks during the last week of the Pacific war. Some, indeed, even died on 14 August, when American bombers, in their largest attack of the Pacific war, pummeled Japan, sometimes dropping their deadly cargo even after Japan had publicly accepted Washington's terms for surrender.¹⁰¹

XII

World War II was virtually total war. All the major powers had killed noncombatants intentionally. That policy repudiated the older morality that soldiers should seek to spare noncombatants. In the 1930s, when much of the civilized world had been horrified by the killings of noncombatants in Shanghai and Guernica, Roosevelt had deplored the barbarism. But by 1945, after the deadly bombings of Hamburg and Dresden, Americans welcomed the bombings, and mass killings, of Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya, . . . Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. The older morality had crumbled in the crucible of what had become virtually total war. Undoubtedly, the impersonality of bombing — the distance between the crew and the victims — made such killing easier. To bayonet civilians could still seem barbarous; to kill them from the air came to seem easy, necessary, and desirable. Technology made such warfare possible; it did not compel these decisions.

The older morality crumbled in the crucible of what became virtually total war. Almost any weapon (gas and biological warfare were usually exceptions) was generally used.¹⁰² General Marshall wanted to cross the moral threshold and employ gas against Japanese soldiers.¹⁰³ And according to one official's postwar recollections, there was also a plan to use biological warfare — not the bacterial form but the chemical mode — to destroy the Japanese rice crop in the early autumn to starve the Japanese into submission.

101 *New York Times*, 15 August 1945; Bernstein, "Perils and Politics of Surrender," 16–17.

102 Barton J. Bernstein, "America's Biological Warfare Program in the Second World War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 11 (September 1988): 292–317; idem, "Why We Didn't Use Poison Gas in World War II," *American Heritage* 36 (August–September 1985): 40–5.

103 McCloy, "Memorandum of Conversation with General Marshall," 29 May 1945.

sion. Perhaps only Japan's earlier surrender prevented that kind of assault upon Japan.¹⁰⁴

In the emerging conception of nearly total war, the enemy was not simply soldiers but noncombatants. They worked in the factories, ran the economy, maintained the civic life, constituted much of the nation, and were the core of national cohesion. Kill them, and production would tumble, the national fabric would rip, armies would soon feel homeless, and the government might surrender.

Stimson, sometimes in moral agony, presided as secretary of war over this transformed morality. It profoundly troubled him, he often chose not to recognize it, and he even told Truman in June that he wanted to be sure that he held the air force to precision bombing partly because, "I did not want to have the United States get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities."¹⁰⁵ Stimson's second reason, undercutting his first, was, as he told Truman, "I was a little fearful that before we could get ready the Air Force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon would not have a fair background to show its strength."¹⁰⁶ Just six days before his conversation with Truman, Stimson had prescribed, with the concurrence of the Interim Committee, "that the most desirable target [for the A-bomb] would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses." Stripped of the euphemisms that these official minutes used, the meaning is clear: Workers and their families would also be the targets of the bomb, whose deadly effects "would be dangerous to life for a radius of at least two-thirds of a mile."¹⁰⁷

Before Hiroshima, although none of Truman's advisers ever opposed the use of the A-bomb on Japan, one man, and only one, did object to the targeting of this new weapon on noncombatants. He was General George C. Marshall, the very leader who was willing to cross the moral threshold to employ gas against enemy soldiers, but reluctant to further cross the moral threshold after the conventional

104 Robert Lovett oral history (1960), Oral History Office, Columbia University, New York City.

105 Stimson Diary, 6 June 1945.

106 Stimson Diary, 6 June 1945.

107 Interim Committee, 31 May 1945, paraphrasing Stimson on targeting and Oppenheimer on dangers.

bombing of noncombatants to use the A-bomb on them. Older martial values, in his case, came to the fore in his quest to protect noncombatants from the atomic bomb. On 29 May 1945, two days before the Interim Committee decision and eight days before Stimson's conversation with Truman, Marshall had urged, unsuccessfully, that the new weapon "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." In that unsuccessful conversation with Stimson, General Marshall had stressed that he feared that the United States would otherwise have to bear the "opprobrium which might follow from an ill-considered employment of such force."¹⁰⁸

Rebuffed by Stimson on the 29th, Marshall apparently never again raised these issues with the secretary, Truman, or anyone else. Loyal to both men, Marshall, in the aftermath of war, never disclosed that he had held, as previously expressed, such strong doubts. Understanding the need to legitimize decisions and to shape national memory, he was always unwilling to mention the moral objections that he had briefly stated, but perhaps deeply felt, in the period before Hiroshima.

XIII

World War II was a terribly bloody war. It killed many millions and maimed many more. It helped transform morality. It ushered in the atomic age. It dramatized the dark side of human capacity and prompted some to redefine "human nature." In America, the war — with its barbarism — was a helpful midwife in the shift in liberal sensibility from the optimistic rationality of John Dewey to the emphasis on the pessimistic irrationality of Reinhold Niebuhr. For some, the names of Eichenwald, Dachau, and Auschwitz would be joined, perhaps uneasily, to Dresden, Hamburg, and Tokyo, and occasionally also to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They

¹⁰⁸ McCloy, "Memorandum of Conversation with General Marshall," 29 May 1945, paraphrasing Marshall, who later approved this memorandum of his discussion with Stimson.

were not moral equivalents, because intentional genocide and intentional mass killing of some noncombatants were not morally identical, but all were powerful testimonials to the fact of massive deaths organized by nation-states, implemented by modern warriors, and endorsed by their civilian populations.

Ultimately, to understand, to rue, and even to deplore the use of the A-bomb are separable, and not necessarily linked, judgments. To fail to understand the reasons for the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is regrettable. To judge those actions by a set of ethical standards usually abandoned in World War II and sometimes revived in later years is appropriate. But to ascribe those moral standards to the leaders and citizens of the United States, or the other major powers, during World War II is to distort the history of that terrible war and to misinterpret the important decisions made in it.