

Critical Thinking: Prof. Barton Bernstein's take

My efforts to apply critical thinking to international relations have been greatly aided by conversations with Prof. Barton Bernstein, who was our guest speaker last week. These notes attempt to convey some of what I learned from those interactions. They deal with two issues:

- Did the A-bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki end World War II?
- Did Dwight D. Eisenhower object to the use of the A-bombs on Japan?

The main goal of these notes is to show how what, at first, might appear to be a simple question is often much more complex.

Did the A-bombs end World War II?

Conventional wisdom attributes the end of World War II to the use of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many arguments, including some made by President Truman, assert that, by bringing the war to an early conclusion, use of the atomic bombs saved hundreds of thousands of American lives. After all, Hiroshima was destroyed on August 6, followed by Nagasaki on August 9. Six days later, on August 15, Emperor Hirohito addressed the Japanese people by radio, announcing the surrender of Japan. This timing, combined with previous, fierce Japanese resistance to Allied advances, makes it understandable that most people believe that the A-bomb alone was responsible for ending the war.

Some historians take an opposing position, and maintain that Hiroshima and Nagasaki had little to do with Japan's surrender. An [abstract](#) for Ward Wilson's [2007 article](#) in *International Security* states:

This article reexamines the widely held presumption that nuclear weapons played a decisive role in winning the war in the Pacific. Based on new research from Japanese, Soviet, and U.S. archives, it concludes that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, played virtually no role in this outcome. A comparison of the responses of high-level Japanese officials to the bombing and the Soviet invasion on August 9 makes clear that the Soviet intervention touched off a crisis, while the bombing of Hiroshima did not. The article examines the evidence that, to save face, Japanese leaders blamed the bomb for losing the war. Finally, it sketches the profound impact this reappraisal may have on how nuclear weapons will be viewed in the future.

A key excerpt from the article itself reads as follows:

Japanese governing bodies did not display a sense of crisis after Hiroshima. First reports of an attack on that city reached Tokyo on August 6 and were confirmed the next day by fuller reports and an announcement by President Truman that a nuclear weapon had been used in the attack. Even after the attack was confirmed, however, the Supreme Council [for the Direction of the War] did not meet for two days. ... When the Soviets intervened on August 9 [and joined the war against Japan, having previously maintained neutrality] and word of the invasion reached Tokyo at around 4:30 a.m., on the other hand, the Supreme Council met by 10:30 that same morning.

A [recent article](#) by historian Gar Alperovitz, after noting that Eisenhower had strong misgivings about the use of the bomb on Japan¹, states:

General Curtis LeMay, the tough cigar-smoking Army Air Force “hawk,” was also dismayed. Shortly after the bombings he stated publicly: “The war would have been over in two weeks. ... The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.”

Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, went public with this statement: “The Japanese had, in fact, already sued for peace. ... The atomic bomb played no decisive part, from a purely military standpoint, in the defeat of Japan.”

[Another article](#) notes:

[On page 334 of his book, *The Decision To Use The Atomic Bomb*,] Alperovitz also quotes General Curtis LeMay, chief of the Air Forces, “The war would have been over in two weeks without the Russians entering and without the atomic bomb.”

PRESS INQUIRY: You mean that, sir? Without the Russians and without the atomic bomb?

LeMay: “The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.” September 29, 1945, statement.

Critically reexamining both arguments – that the bombs ended the war, and that they had little impact – provides a more nuanced picture. After extensive reading on this subject, coupled with several conversations with Prof. Bernstein, here’s my current thinking – subject to change should new information require that:

¹ Questions are raised later in this handout about whether or not Eisenhower was correct in this remembrance.

Japan was not of one mind. While almost self-evident once stated, and clearly applying more broadly than just to Japan, this is often overlooked by blanket statements about a nation. An example occurs in President Eisenhower's 1963 memoir, *Mandate for Change*, when he writes of a July 1945 meeting with Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, "It was my belief that Japan was, at the very moment, seeking to surrender with a minimum of loss of face." Critical thinking would deconstruct such statements and ask what factions within the nation think that way, what factions think otherwise, and then weigh their relative power to implement policy. We do that with Eisenhower's assertion – also made by many others – immediately below. I should note that, in spite of this admonition, either to avoid cumbersome phrases or out of carelessness, I will sometimes be guilty of this very sin.

In the months prior to Hiroshima, some factions within Japan were seeking peace on the terms that were eventually allowed (in particular, allowing the Emperor to continue as a figurehead), while other factions were adamant in seeking better terms. Intercepts and cryptanalysis of classified, coded Japanese messages, known under the code name MAGIC, told this to the American hierarchy almost in real time. The next page reproduces a now declassified page of [MAGIC intercepts dated July 12](#), 1945, and quotes Japanese Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo as cabling his Ambassador to Moscow Naotake Sato on 11 JULY, and saying: "We are now secretly giving consideration to the termination of the war because of the pressing situation which confronts Japan both at home and abroad." Many other MAGIC intercepts and primary source material dealing with this question are [summarized](#) on George Washington University's National Security Archives web site. That page has links to the original sources. The July 13 MAGIC intercept quotes another cable from Togo to Sato as saying:

We should therefore like you to present this matter to [Soviet Foreign Minister] Molotov in the following terms: 'His Majesty the Emperor, mindful of the fact that the present war daily brings greater evil and sacrifice upon the peoples of all belligerent powers, desires from his heart that it may be quickly terminated. But so long as England and the United States insist on unconditional surrender the Japanese Empire has no alternative but to fight on with all its strength for the honor and existence of the Motherland.' ... It is the Emperor's private intention to send Prince Konoye to Moscow as a Special Envoy with a letter from him containing the statements given above. Please inform Molotov of this.

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No. 1204 - 12 July 1945

WAR DEPARTMENT
Office of A. C. of S., G-2

By Auth. A. C. of S., G-2
Date 12 July 1945
Initials C. W. C.

"MAGIC" - DIPLOMATIC SUMMARY

NOTE: No one, without express permission from the proper authorities, may disseminate the information reported in this Summary or communicate it to any other person.

Those authorized to disseminate such information must employ only the most secure means, must take every precaution to avoid compromising the source, and must limit dissemination to the minimum number of secure and responsible persons who need the information in order to discharge their duties.

No action is to be taken on information herein reported, regardless of temporary advantage, if such action might have the effect of revealing the existence of the source to the enemy.

The enemy knows that we attempt to exploit these sources. He does not know, and must not be permitted to learn, either the degree of our success or the particular sources with which we have been successful.

MILITARY

1. Japanese peace move: On 11 July Foreign (196154
Minister Togo sent the following "extremely urgent" 196155
message to Ambassador Sato: WLMR)

"We are now secretly giving consideration to the termination of the war because of the pressing situation which confronts Japan both

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That other, powerful factions within Japan had other ideas is amply demonstrated by the [Kyujō Incident](#), a coup attempt by military officers on the night of August 14-15, attempting to put the Emperor under house arrest and stop the surrender process. The coup failed and the surrender process went forward.

Japan's unconditional surrender was conditional. President Truman had made unconditional surrender a key point in his public statements, so anything less would be seen as backtracking. (Watch a short [movie newsreel](#) from May 1945 that ends with Truman demanding Japan's unconditional surrender.) Most of the Japanese, including many of those seeking a peace agreement in the months preceding Hiroshima, required that they be allowed to keep the office of Emperor. That requirement also fit General MacArthur's [conviction](#) that he needed the Emperor retained to ease the task of occupying and governing Japan. The [surrender document](#) was carefully crafted to meet both needs, and was basically a conditional unconditional surrender. Early on it proclaims "the unconditional surrender to the Allied Powers of the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters and of all Japanese armed forces and all armed forces under Japanese control wherever situated." But later it stipulates, "The authority of the Emperor and the Japanese Government to rule the state shall be subject to the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers," implicitly agreeing to a continued role for the Emperor! Also, only the armed forces of Japan are said to unconditionally surrender, not the entire government including the Emperor.

America's demands for unconditional surrender may have cost hundreds of thousands of lives, many of them American. For the above reasons, Japan might well have surrendered much earlier, and certainly prior to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, under essentially the same terms it eventually received. While, at first, this might seem to be Truman's fault (see the topic immediately above), he was subject to domestic political considerations and other pressures as can be seen from a [July 16, 1945, cable](#) from former Secretary of State Cordell Hull to then Secretary of State James Byrnes, opposing a peace option that would explicitly retain the Emperor. (If you follow the link, note that the cable was sent on Hull's behalf by Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew. Otherwise it can be confusing.) The cable says that retaining the Emperor as a constitutional monarch was supported by "the heads of War and Navy and by the Under Secretary of State" and continues:

The proponents believe that this step might shorten the war and save allied lives. . . . The other side is that no person knows how the proposal would work out. The [Japanese] militarists would try hard to interfere [as they in fact did with their coup attempt during the night of 15-16 August, known as the Kyujō Incident]. Also should it fail the Japs

would be encouraged while terrible political repercussions would follow in the U.S. Would it be well first to await the climax of allied bombing and Russia's entry into the war?

Japan's resistance to specifying surrender terms it would find acceptable cost hundreds of thousands of lives, mostly Japanese. The sequence of MAGIC intercepts on the previously mentioned National Security Archives [web site](#) shows that even those Japanese most committed to seeking peace were unwilling or unable to specify concrete conditions for a peace treaty. For example, the [July 29 MAGIC intercept](#) quotes Japan's Ambassador to Moscow, Naotake Sato:

I find it most difficult to make any prediction as to the Soviet reply to our proposal. If the proposal of the Japanese Government simply requests the aid of the Soviet Government [in ending the war] and if it fails to give any indication of the basis on which this request is made, then I think it not at all unlikely that the Soviet Government will refuse to consider it on the ground that it cannot decide upon such a momentous move on such a flimsy basis.

The A-bomb probably played some role in the Soviet decision to enter the war. The above evidence indicates that the Soviet declaration of war played an important, and possibly a decisive role in ending the war. In May 1945, when Nazi Germany had been defeated, Stalin committed to enter the war against Japan within three months. At first, this might seem to imply that the August 6 and 9 atomic bombings played no role in the Soviet Union's August 9 declaration of war on Japan. But, Stalin's May decision may have been encouraged by Soviet espionage which showed America close to completing the bomb.

The role of the A-bomb in ending the war is exaggerated in the general societal belief. While the bomb played a role in ending the war, it was not the sole cause. I would not go as far as Ward Wilson's statement that the bomb "played virtually no role" in ending the war, but the evidence he and Alperovitz present discredits the generally accepted societal view that the bomb was solely, or even primarily responsible. As is often the case, the truth is more nuanced.

Some factions wanted to use the bomb on a Japanese city in order to impress the Soviet Union that it should accept American hegemony in the post-war world. In a 2003 interview² Manhattan Project scientist Joseph Rotblat was asked, “In addition to World War II concerns, was America's fear of the post war Soviet Union a significant factor in the development of the bomb?” He answers:

Officially not, because Russia was our ally at the time. However, many people involved always felt that the main enemy was Russia. I personally knew about this as a result of an informal meeting with General Leslie Groves [director of the Manhattan Project]. He said to me, “You realize, of course, that the whole purpose of this is to subdue the Russians.” So it was clear that the Cold War had already started during the hot war [World War II].

This interview is not accessible on line, but a [similar quote is](#), and appears to be a reprint of a 1983 Rotblat article from the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Of course, Rotblat’s memory may be mistaken, and one highly knowledgeable person with whom I’ve discussed this believes that is the case. He made the point that it seemed out of character for General Groves to talk the way Rotblat remembers. This is not to criticize Rotblat, who has a reputation as impeccably honest. A person can be absolutely certain that something occurred, but be absolutely wrong. It’s happened to me more than once. (When I was younger, I was blind to such lapses, so watch out!)

The widespread misconception that the A-bomb ended World War II haunts us today. If nuclear weapons were powerful enough to transform a belligerent Japan into a nation seeking peace on any terms, that would be strong evidence that nuclear deterrence should not be tampered with. If that belief is wrong, it is a dangerous foundation for building our current nuclear logic.

Did Eisenhower object to the use of the A-bombs on Japan?

Prof. Bernstein’s article, “Ike and Hiroshima: Did He Oppose It?”, in the September 1987 issue of *The Journal of Strategic Studies* summarizes the evidence better than any notes I could create. Please read that article, which I will get to you separately from this handout. It is a masterpiece of critical thinking.

² Guy Harrison interview with Joseph Rotblat, “Fighting the Bomb,” in *The Caymanian Compass*, Friday, 28 March 2003, pages A20-A21. Rotblat was awarded the [1995 Nobel Peace prize](#), for his “efforts to diminish the part played by nuclear arms in international politics and, in the longer run, to eliminate such arms.”