Correspondence

Marshall, Truman, and the Decision to Drop the Bomb

Gar Alperovitz and Robert L. Messer
Barton J. Bernstein

To the Editors:

In the Spring 1991 issue of International Security, Barton J. Bernstein reported that at the end of World War II, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall and others briefly explored using nuclear weapons tactically in connection with plans for the possible invasion of Japan. Although Marshall’s interest in this option has been known for some time,1 Bernstein’s contribution sheds considerable light on the earliest thinking about tactical nuclear weapons.

However, Bernstein also strongly suggests that Marshall’s consideration of the tactical option somehow negates a now very considerable body of other evidence showing that American leaders understood that when the Soviet Union entered the war against Japan (expected in early August 1945), the shock of this event would likely precipitate a surrender without the atomic bomb, and long before an initial landing on the island of Kyushu (set for planning purposes three months later, in the first week of November).

If Bernstein is right, many other important issues of interpretation connected with the only use of nuclear weapons in history are put into question. For instance, because he thinks an invasion was still deemed likely, Bernstein suggests his research “raises

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Gar Alperovitz, author of Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam, Fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies, and President of the National Center for Economic Alternatives, is working on a new book on the Hiroshima decision and its long-term legacy. Robert L. Messer, Professor of History at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is author of The End of An Alliance: James F. Byrnes, Roosevelt, Truman and the Origins of the Cold War, and is currently working on a book treating Truman’s nuclear policy.

Barton J. Bernstein is a Professor of History at Stanford University, and has long been writing on nuclear history.

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serious doubts" about arguments that the bomb was used "primarily to intimidate the Soviet Union" (pp. 151, 169).

We believe that Bernstein is wrong, first because evidence concerning Marshall's view of a possible tactical use of nuclear weapons is very sketchy; second because information concerning discussions on the subject by Marshall and others lower down the chain of command is different from information about the top officials who actually made the crucial decisions; third, and above all, because the most recently discovered evidence concerning the view of President Truman himself runs strongly counter to Bernstein's interpretation.

THE SHOCK OF RUSSIAN ENTRY AND THE FADING LIKELIHOOD OF AN INVASION
As in all complex questions of historical analysis it is, of course, possible to debate matters of nuance and emphasis. However, it is no longer a novel argument that in the late summer of 1945 President Truman and his top advisers were aware that use of the atomic bomb was no longer necessary to avoid an invasion. In his recent survey of the literature on the bomb decision, J. Samuel Walker, chief historian of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, concludes:

Careful scholarly treatment of the records and manuscripts opened over the past few years has greatly enhanced our understanding of why the Truman administration used atomic weapons against Japan. Experts continue to disagree on some issues, but critical questions have been answered. The consensus among scholars is that the bomb was not needed to avoid an invasion of Japan. . . . It is clear that alternatives to the bomb existed and that Truman and his advisers knew it.2

Doubts about the necessity of an invasion have long existed. As early as mid-1946, for instance, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey—after extensive interviews of Japanese officials and analysis of military, political, and economic evidence—also judged that Japan would likely have collapsed before an invasion.3 Again, a recently discovered intelligence study prepared for then Chief of Staff General Eisenhower a few months after Hiroshima concludes, first, that even an initial landing on Kyushu was only a "remote" possibility, and second, that it is "almost a certainty that the Japanese would have capitulated upon the entry of Russia into the war."

The Japanese leaders had decided to surrender and were merely looking for sufficient pretext to convince the die-hard Army Group that Japan had lost the war and must capitulate to the Allies. The entry of Russia into the war would almost certainly have

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2. J. Samuel Walker, "The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update," Diplomatic History, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Winter 1990), p. 110. (Emphasis added.) Curiously, Walker writes unequivocally that the "United States did not drop the bomb to save hundreds of thousands of lives" and also notes a consensus that the bomb was "used primarily for military reasons and secondarily for diplomatic ones" (pp. 110–111).

furnished this pretext, and would have been sufficient to convince all responsible leaders that surrender was unavoidable.  

In opposing such judgments, Bernstein rests part of his initial argument on a misstatement of fact and a misrepresentation of the alternative position. Singling out work by one of us (Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy), Bernstein claims that Marshall's position and his advice to President Truman during an important June 18, 1945, military planning meeting have been "misinterpreted." Bernstein writes that:

Marshall stated . . . that "a landing on Japan . . . and also perhaps coupled with . . . the entry or threat of entry of Russia into the war" might produce Japan's surrender "short of [Japan's] complete military defeat in the field" (emphasis added). Thus, Marshall was coupling an American invasion and Soviet entry or its prospect, and not arguing that Soviet entry or its prospect without an American invasion would produce a surrender. In short, American entry was the essential part of this estimate (p. 169, note 70; Bernstein's emphasis).

But this is not the material cited and quoted in Atomic Diplomacy. Although it is true, as Bernstein indicates, that at one point during the meeting Marshall did link Soviet entry with a possible American landing, in fact, he ended his presentation on this issue to the president with the following judgment: "An important point about Russian participation in the war is that the impact of Russian entry on the already hopeless Japanese may well be the decisive action levering them into capitulation at that time or shortly thereafter if we land in Japan."

In the end, Marshall concluded that Soviet entry could well be decisive. Furthermore, this is hardly the only evidence that as Japan's condition worsened American leaders understood in advance—well before use of the atomic bomb was authorized—that an invasion was increasingly unlikely. The date of an OPD (Operations Division) planning document that Bernstein himself cites is June 4, 1945. And in the above passage Marshall is basing his argument directly (word for word in this instance) on a Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum. Long before the June 18 presidential meeting,

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4. National Archives (NA), Record Group (RG) 165, Entry 421, ABC Decimal File 1942-48, Box 570, "ABC 471.6, Atom (17 August 1945) Sec. 7," Memorandum for Chief, Strategic Policy Section, Strategy and Policy Group, OPD (Operations Division), Subject: Use of Atomic Bomb on Japan, April 30, 1946.


6. As Bernstein notes, an excerpt of the June 4, 1945, OPD document is conveniently available in Ray S. Cline, Washington Command Post: The Operations Division (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Chief of Military History, 1951), p. 344, in the series United States Army in World War, Vol. II: The War Department. The full text is available at the National Archives (NA), Record Group (RG) 107, Stimson Safe Files, Box 8, "Japan (After 7/41)" (initialed by Stimson). See below on the question of "hedging."

in fact, many top level intelligence and other officials had reached a similar conclusion. As early as April 18, 1945, the Joint Intelligence Staff put the crucial issue thus: "If at any time the U.S.S.R. should enter the war, practically all Japanese will realize that absolute defeat is inevitable."

There is considerable confusion in the literature on how the assessments of top U.S. leaders concerning the likely impact of a Soviet declaration of war changed as the summer progressed: Although earlier in the war the primary role assigned to the Red Army was to pin down Japanese armies in Manchuria so as to prevent them from reinforcing the main islands during an invasion, once the sea lanes to Japan had been cut this was no longer crucial. Thereafter—especially since the Russian attack would undercut the standing of the hard-line Japanese army faction in the Cabinet—the shock value of a Russian declaration of war became increasingly important.

Marshall’s advice to the President on June 18, 1945, was presented seven weeks before the bombing of Hiroshima. During the ensuing period, Japan’s condition deteriorated even further, with the result that a Soviet attack appeared likely to have even greater shock impact. On July 6, 1945, for instance, the Combined Intelligence Committee offered this assessment to the Combined Chiefs of Staff: “An entry of the Soviet Union into the war would finally convince the Japanese of the inevitability of complete defeat.”

THE TRUMAN DIARY AND THE PRESIDENT’S PERSONAL VIEW

Bernstein suggests that a number of the intelligence estimates “hedged” their conclusions. Aside from the fact that it would be a rare intelligence officer who would commit himself unequivocally on so important a point as precisely when Japan would surrender, a common sequence of argumentation appears in a series of key documents. A typical statement: If “the U.S.S.R. should enter the war, all Japanese will realize that absolute defeat is inevitable.” Thereafter, goes this argument, the war can probably be ended rather quickly if Japan can be made to understand that unconditional surrender does not imply annihilation or national suicide.

It is important to note that these “estimates of the situation” preceded the most important indication that the Japanese recognized their situation was impossible: the


9. See the discussion on this point in Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy (1985 ed.), pp. 22–27. See also Entry, pp. 78–80. But note carefully: If it was believed the president would still demand “unconditional” surrender, then all bets were off—and Red Army help in Manchuria would still be needed in a battle expected to be fought to the last man. However, see below on the president’s attitude towards changing the surrender formula.


11. Taken from preliminary estimate of the Joint Intelligence Staff on April 11, 1945, NA, RG 165, Entry 421, ABC Decimal File 1942–48, Box 504, “ABC 387 Japan (15 Feb. 45) Sec 1-A,” Report by Joint Intelligence Staff on Unconditional Surrender of Japan, JIS 143/2, April 11, 1945.

12. See, for instance, the April 25, 1945, Joint Intelligence Committee estimate. NA, RG 165,
direct personal intervention of the Emperor beginning in late June. Decrypted intercepted Japanese messages (MAGIC) of July 12 and July 25 were impressive confirmation of Japan’s trajectory of decline, and dramatically underscored the conclusions of the earlier evidence. In his recent analysis of the end of the war, Leon V. Sigal observes that “one point was clear to senior U.S. officials regardless of where they stood on war termination. . . . [They] knew that the critical condition for Japan’s surrender was the assurance that the throne would be preserved.”13 As Robert Butow put it in his classic study of Japan’s surrender decision: “It was all there, as clear as crystal: Togo to Sato: ‘Unconditional surrender is the only obstacle to peace.’”14

It is in this context that Truman made his decision, and it is in connection with the president’s personal judgments that the most important new information concerning the Hiroshima decision has been discovered in recent years. Far more important than the intelligence and planning evidence, and far more important than Marshall’s advice (however one interprets his successive arguments), Truman’s personal hand-written journal (discovered in 1978), together with personal letters to his wife (first made public in 1983) give direct evidence of how the president personally understood the developing situation.

In his diary entry for July 18, for instance, Truman set forth his understanding of the latest intercepted Japanese message, referring to it straightforwardly as the “telegram from Jap [sic] Emperor asking for peace.”15 During their first private meeting, Stalin had assured Truman that the Soviet Union would ignore the emperor’s approach and declare war on Japan by August 15. Truman welcomed this news by recording in his diary his interpretation of the meaning of Soviet entry: “Fini Japs when that comes about,” thus personally underlining essentially the same point made in several of the intelligence and OPD documents.16

How long he thought it would take to finish the Japanese war once the Russians had dashed all hopes for a negotiated peace, Truman made clear in a letter to his wife the following day. As he put it: “I’ll say that we’ll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won’t be killed!”17

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Entry 421, ABC Decimal File 1942-48, Box 504, “ABC 387 Japan (15 Feb 45) Sec 1-A,” JIC 268/1, April 25, 1945.
Regardless of what some of his subordinates might have thought, it is clear that the American commander-in-chief was not fundamentally worried about tactical nuclear warfare in support of an invasion he now saw as increasingly unlikely. Indeed, in a much-overlooked passage of his memoirs, Truman stated the rather obvious crucial point in explaining why, before the successful atomic test, he had wanted Soviet participation in the war: "If the test should fail, then it would be even more important to us to bring about a surrender before we had to make a physical conquest of Japan."18

On July 18, having a fuller grasp of the meaning of the bomb, Truman concluded that Japan would "fold up" before Russia entered the war: The bomb would make both an invasion and Soviet help unnecessary.19 Such evidence has become part of the modern scholarship of the bomb decision. Indeed, Bernstein himself has helped make it so. It is therefore all the more surprising that he chose to ignore it in his recent article.20

TRUMAN AND UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

Although Bernstein rests a good deal of his argument that an invasion was still considered likely upon evidence of Marshall’s brief exploration of the tactical nuclear option, he also observes (correctly in our judgment) that this is not decisive in connection with the broader issues—and furthermore that Truman and other higher level officials probably did not even know about it (p. 166). Even the seriousness of Marshall’s interest is by no means proven: Bernstein cites only one indirect telephone inquiry for the Chief of Staff by General Hull to Colonel Seeman (one of General Groves’s aides) as an indication that Marshall in August still believed an invasion might be necessary (p. 166).

Of course such a possibility was not entirely dismissed. Planning and preparations for a November invasion continued until the end of the war. As a seasoned planner, most likely Marshall was simply keeping his options open, and preparing for all contingencies. As chief of staff he would, in fact, have been derelict in his duties had he not asked his staff to explore all feasible possibilities. More important, throughout this period Marshall was necessarily operating on the assumption—still at this point “official” presidential policy—that the United States sought the “unconditional surrender” of Japan. On this assumption, no one could discount the necessity of an invasion.

As the Combined Intelligence Committee put it: "The Japanese believe . . . that unconditional surrender would be the equivalent of national extinction. There are as yet no indications that the Japanese are ready to accept such terms."21

On the other hand, it is very difficult to argue that President Truman felt so strongly about unconditional surrender that he would have proceeded with an invasion with no change in the formula. Quite the contrary. Though he may have preferred to hold strictly to the formula, on several occasions the president made it quite clear that he did not regard it as in any way sacrosanct—almost certainly not worth the lives an invasion would cost. When Acting Secretary of State Joseph C. Grew suggested a change of terms on May 28, 1945, for instance, Truman said that "his own thoughts had been following the same line."22 When Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy urged a change on June 18, 1945, Truman replied: "Well, that's what I've been thinking about." He asked McCloy to "put that down and give it to" Secretary of State James F. Byrnes to "see what we can do from that."23 And when Secretary of War Henry Stimson urged him to make the change at Potsdam if the Japanese "were hanging fire on that one point," he "said that he had that in mind, and that he would take care of it."24 (Stimson commented a few days later in his diary that the president and Secretary Byrnes "were not obdurate on it."25)

A sense of Truman's priorities is also indicated by his instruction to Admiral Leahy on June 14, 1945, that it was "his intention to make his decisions on the campaign with the purpose of economizing to the maximum extent possible in the loss of American lives."26 And given what we know about the strong views of the intelligence community on this point, Truman's judgment that once the Russians attacked, the war would likely end, almost certainly reflects his recognition that the unconditional surrender terms would have to have been bent unless he wished to risk a fight to the finish.27

Some analysts have debated—after the fact—whether Japan would or would not have surrendered on such terms. Further illumination of how top allied leaders understood the emerging situation at the time is provided by General Ismay's private summary of the Combined Intelligence Estimate of July 6, 1945, to Churchill, and its conclusion that: "when Russia came into the war against Japan, the Japanese would

24. Stimson Diary, July 24, 1945, Stimson Papers, Yale University.
25. Ibid., August 19, 1945. See also Forrestal Diaries, p. 69.
26. Entry, p. 76.
probably wish to get out on almost any terms short of the dethronement of the
Emperor.” In this regard it is also instructive to note that Marshall joined in an
extraordinary “end-run” at Potsdam in which the U.S. Chiefs of Staff urged the
British Chiefs to get Churchill to press Truman to change the terms. 28

There were, of course, still four months to go from the time the above Combined
Intelligence Estimate was written until an invasion could take place, and almost three
months still to go when Hiroshima was destroyed.

MARSHALL’S ROLE

A final but fundamental point, partly conceded but in our view insufficiently em-
phasized in Bernstein’s article, concerns Marshall’s role in the decision to use the
bomb. In general, Marshall held back from injecting himself into what he regarded
as areas of “civilian” decision-making responsibility, and he observed more than once
that the actual decision to use the atomic bomb fell into this category. 29 Although he
acted as a military consultant, Marshall was not a member of the Interim Committee,
a select group of advisers formed to make recommendations on the bomb. He was,
in fact, absent from the May 31, 1945, Interim Committee meeting when the method
of the bomb’s use was first agreed. 30 When he did propose to the Committee that
Soviet representatives be invited to the Alamogordo test, he was summarily overruled
by Byrnes, Truman’s personal representative. 31 Bernstein’s own research, moreover,
has cast doubt on whether the Joint Chiefs of Staff were consulted on the atomic
decision at Potsdam (as Truman suggested in his memoirs they were). 32 Marshall
simply was not “in the loop” when it came to many of the political-diplomatic issues
surrounding the bomb.

The opinions of General Marshall, while not unimportant, thus hardly bear the
weight Bernstein places upon them and on discussions lower down the chain of
command. As most historians now recognize, far more relevant in the decision-
making process as the summer progressed was the thinking of Marshall’s superior,
Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, Truman’s hand-picked secretary of state, James

28. The Joint Chiefs subsequently shifted their position, but only after being instructed that the
matter had been decided at the “political level.” For a discussion of the point, see Marc S.
note that the “end-run” assumed the formula would be changed in connection with the expected
Russian declaration of war. Another oft-cited bit of advice—that of former Secretary of State
Cordell Hull—urging that the terms not be changed is commonly mis-interpreted: Hull urged
that this not be done at the moment, but that it was best to wait until after the Russian declaration
FRUS: Potsdam II, p. 1267.

29. On Marshall’s general reluctance to intervene in civilian decision-making at this time, see
See also Ed Cray, General of the Army (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. 538.

30. “Notes of the Interim Committee Meeting, May 31, 1945,” NA, RG 77, Manhattan Engineer
District, Harrison-Bundy Files, Folder No. 100.

31. Ibid.

F. Byrnes, and above all commander-in-chief President Truman himself. Finally, contrary to Bernstein’s suggestion, for the most part scholars who question the atomic decision do not rest their argument in fundamental ways on Marshall’s position; his passing interest in the tactical nuclear option is largely irrelevant to many of the key questions.

"IMPRESSING THE RUSSIANS" AND OTHER DIPLOMATIC CONSIDERATIONS

This is not the place to attempt to resolve a host of other questions concerning the precise weight to place on factors related to the Soviet Union in American decision-making in connection with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The motives underlying the atomic bombing of Japan are complex, varying over time and among the many advisers and policy makers at different levels of authority. We agree that the issue Bernstein raises bears on this question. But we do not agree with his conclusions.

The contention that invasion plans still dominated the very top policy makers’ thinking about the bomb in the late summer of 1945 is not sustained by the available evidence. That evidence, some of it in the president’s own hand, shows clearly that military concerns about an invasion steadily diminished while political factors came to the fore in high-level thinking on how best to use the bomb. Nonetheless, the denials by Truman, Stimson and other defenders of the bombing of any political motives and their assertions that the bomb was used solely to save lives that would have been lost in a bloody invasion have entered the realm of myth and continue to hold a powerful place in the popular mind.

Clearly, foremost among the political factors influencing the decision was what Stimson called the “Russian problem.” Many scholars now recognize that at least three distinct Soviet-related factors were involved in the decision. These go well beyond the commonly used but oversimplified catch-phrase “intimidating the Russians.”

First, although initially American leaders sought Soviet entry into the war, once the atomic bomb was proven their views changed dramatically: The bomb now seemed a way to end the war before the Red Army (and Soviet political influence) got very far into Manchuria. This is precisely the argument Truman used in private the day after the Nagasaki bombing in explaining to the Cabinet his modification of the demand for unconditional surrender.33 Second, the bomb also meant that the United States would not have to share the victory over Japan with the Russians. Third, Byrnes in particular (but Truman and Stimson as well) saw the bomb as a way to strengthen America’s diplomatic hand not only in the Far East but in negotiations over the fate of Europe in general, and Eastern Europe in particular.

There is now, of course, a great deal of information on the diplomatic utility of using the atomic bomb, including the evidence of Truman’s private thinking noted above and, for example, Leo Szilard’s report of his May 28, 1945, meeting with Byrnes,

who "did not argue that it was necessary to use the bomb against the cities of Japan in order to win the war. . . . Mr. Byrnes's . . . view [was] that our possessing and demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable in Europe"; and Stimson's private mid-May observation that the bomb was the "master card" of diplomacy, and his advice that we should "let our actions speak for words. The Russians will understand them better than anything else. . . . We have got to regain the lead and perhaps do it in a pretty rough and realistic way. . . . We have coming into action a weapon which will be unique."34

It also includes several by now well-known contemporary reports indicating that once the bomb was proven, Secretary Byrnes was "most anxious to get the Japanese affair over with before the Russians got in."35 Another private journal—that of Byrnes' personal assistant Walter Brown—observes that the Secretary of State was "hoping for time, believing that after [the] atomic bomb Japan will surrender and Russia will not get in so much on the kill, thereby being in a position to press claims against China."36

We ourselves differ as to the precise weight to assign the diplomatic factors.37 We also feel that—given the huge gaps in the record and the complexity of the process—it is still impossible to determine exactly what happened, and precisely how the actual decision was made.38 However, it is important to note that many historians now agree that these factors were far more than coincidental or a mere "bonus," as Bernstein holds. Even the late Herbert Feis—special consultant to three secretaries of war, friend of Stimson, and an insider's insider—revised his initial account to include "impressing" the Russians as an element in the decision.39 Martin Sherwin's emphasis, too, has evolved, with more weight now placed on diplomatic factors in explaining why Truman and Byrnes "preferred" the atomic bomb to other available options as the inherited policy assumptions were evaluated in the late summer of 1945. Sherwin

35. Forrestal Diaries, p. 78.
36. Walter Brown, diary entry for July 24, 1945, original manuscript copy in private papers of Walter Brown, Spartanburg, S.C.
38. Many analysts have ignored caveats in both editions of Atomic Diplomacy stating Alperovitz's view that on the basis of presently available evidence "no final conclusion can be reached" on why the atomic bomb was used, and that what is so far known only "strongly suggests" the importance of the Soviet-related factors. See Atomic Diplomacy (1985 ed.), pp. 1, 64, 289–290.
has suggested the bomb may even have prolonged the war because of the role it played in the decision to delay modification of the unconditional surrender formula. And Gregg Herken has observed that "responsible traditional as well as revisionist accounts of the decision to drop the bomb now recognize that the act had behind it both an immediate military rationale regarding Japan and a possible diplomatic advantage concerning Russia." A recent summary assessment is that of Gaddis Smith: "It has been demonstrated that the decision to bomb Japan was centrally connected to Truman's confrontational approach to the Soviet Union."

—Gar Alperovitz
Washington, D.C.
—Robert L. Messer
Chicago

The author replies:

My article focused at length on thinking about tactical nuclear war in 1945; a tiny section of 2½ pages, not essential to the general analysis, indicated very briefly how some of my evidence and conclusions had implications for helping to understand the dropping of the atomic bombs in 1945.

Alperovitz and Messer have presented their thoughtful views on how to interpret some crucial evidence and, thus, on why the bombs were used. Their letter-essay merits serious attention because they raise important issues, because they are intelligent scholars who have long worked on these problems, and because the central question of why the bombs were used is of great significance.

Much of the longtime dispute dividing us rests heavily on evidence—the careful reading of documents, the interpreting of documents in the appropriate context, and the assessing of different documents from various sources and times.

SPLITS WITHIN THE CONSENSUS: QUESTIONS OF ALTERNATIVES AND ABOUT SOVIET ENTRY

Alperovitz and Messer began by correctly but incompletely quoting historian J. Samuel Walker’s characterization of the scholarly consensus. The two relevant sentences from Walker, in full, are:


The consensus among scholars is that the bomb was not needed to avoid an invasion of Japan and to end the war within a relatively short time [Bernstein emphasis]. It is clear that alternatives to the bomb existed and that Truman and his advisers knew it.

In the context of Walker’s entire essay, it is clear that he skillfully amalgamated disputing interpreters by their agreement on this loose conception of “a relatively short time.” Some interpreters contend that the war could have definitely ended without the bomb and before November 1, 1945 (the date for the Kyushu invasion); others believe that, if the bomb had not been used, the war might have gone on into December 1945 or possibly later. That would have meant the dreaded invasion—and the loss of about 23,000 or more American lives (an important concern for Truman and his advisers). Thus, the actual scholarly consensus is so broad on this matter that it accommodates Alperovitz and Messer, establishment historian Herbert Feis, and myself, among others. It is within this scholarly consensus that we here disagree.

Within this loose consensus, there is also agreement that Truman and his advisers knew that they had alternatives to the bomb, but there is substantial disagreement as to why Truman and his officials did not pursue these alternatives instead; whether these men even sought such alternatives; which alternatives might have succeeded; when they might have succeeded; and at what costs. These are, indeed, the issues that divide Alperovitz and Messer from me.

To understand the reasons for using the atomic bombs, analysts should carefully distinguish between two questions: 1) what did Truman and his top associates know and believe before Hiroshima about the likely ending of the war; and 2) what did post-Hiroshima analysts, including government personnel, conclude would probably have happened in ending the war if the bombs had not been used. Alperovitz and Messer risk conflating these questions and their answers by relying on a 1946 United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) report and a 1946 Army study. Its necessarily speculative conclusions of what might have happened, quoted by Alperovitz and Messer, cannot establish what Truman and his advisers believed or even what they should have believed before Hiroshima.

Far more important is the question of what advice General George C. Marshall, army chief of staff and a trusted adviser, gave the president and others at the special White House meeting on June 18, 1945, about the likely impact of Soviet entry into the Pacific war. Toward the end of Marshall’s statement, according to the minutes of the meeting, he said, as Alperovitz and Messer stress: “the impact of Russian entry on the already hopeless Japanese may well be the decisive action levering them into capitulation at that time or shortly thereafter if we land in Japan [Bernstein emphasis].”

What does that sentence mean? Alperovitz and Messer are sure of its meaning, and disregard its ambiguity. If the sentence had a comma just before “or shortly thereafter if we land in Japan,” the meaning would be quite clear: Soviet entry might produce surrender at the time of the entry, or it might do so later when the invasion occurred. But without that crucial comma, the sentence is troublingly ambiguous. In contrast to Alperovitz’s and Messer’s interpretation, the sentence can also be plausibly interpreted to mean that American invasion was deemed essential to whether Soviet entry could produce a surrender.
Fortunately there is a way out of this impasse over interpretation, as my article indicated in a substantial footnote (p. 169, n. 70). We can examine Marshall’s statement, five paragraphs earlier in the June 18 minutes, where he first discussed the problem of Japan’s surrender and the issue of Soviet entry:

If the Japanese are ever willing to capitulate short of complete military defeat in the field they will do it when faced by the completely hopeless prospect occasioned by (1) destruction already wrought by air bombardment and sea blockade, coupled with (2) a landing on Japan indicating the firmness of our resolution, and also perhaps coupled with (3) the entry or threat of entry of Russia into the war [Bernstein emphasis].

This passage is precise; it makes clear that Marshall thought that the possibly decisive impact of Soviet entry required the invasion. Marshall’s later sentence, which is ambiguous if read in isolation, is not ambiguous if read in context, but Alperovitz and Messer have ignored the context, and thus misconstrued the sentence.

For Marshall and most of his listeners at that high-level White House meeting, the invasion did seem necessary. For them, Soviet entry was not a substitute for invasion. Soviet entry was not defined as an alternative way of ending the war. But Soviet entry could be a supplement to invasion. And they hoped the bomb would obviate the need for the invasion.

The July 6, 1945, Combined Intelligence Committee did report: “An entry of the Soviet Union in to the war would finally convince the Japanese of the inevitability of complete defeat.” But that statement apparently did not include any judgment on when Japan would surrender. The gap between a government’s recognition of “the inevitability of complete defeat” and the time that it actually surrendered could be weeks or months—and many lives. Both that committee and the recipients of its report knew, painfully, that it had been clear to all reasonable people, by late 1944 and probably earlier, that Germany’s complete defeat was inevitable. But the German surrender did not occur until May 1945.

JAPAN’S PEACE FEELERS AND RELATED CABLES, AND THE MODIFICATION OF UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER TERMS

Contrary to Alperovitz and Messer, the evidence is far more mixed, and complex, about Japan’s various pre-Hiroshima cables and what they disclosed in context about the inclinations of the Japanese government to surrender. It is true that many cables did indicate that the allied demand for unconditional surrender was an impediment, but not the only one. Concern about such an impediment was one of the powerful reasons that the United States, with the U.K. and China, issued the Potsdam Proclamation on July 26: to redefine the surrender terms to provide certain guarantees for Japan.

2. Official British historian John Ehrman, upon whom Alperovitz and Messer rely at another juncture (their note 27), concluded that this CIC report about convincing “the Japanese” probably referred to the Japanese people, not Japanese leaders, Ehrman, “The Decision to Use the Bombs,” manuscript ca. 1958–62, p. 247, CAB 101/45, Public Record Office (Kew), Great Britain.
In retrospect, it is unfortunate—perhaps tragically so—that this Proclamation did not also include (as Stimson, McCloy, and Grew desired) an explicit guarantee for continuation of the emperor. That guarantee was removed by Byrnes, with Truman’s approval, after former Secretary of State Cordell Hull warned Byrnes that such a guarantee could sour the still-new administration’s political honeymoon and might prolong, not shorten, the war by nurturing Japanese hopes for additional concessions. Such a guarantee might have produced a surrender without the A-bomb and before the scheduled November invasion. But such a guarantee, in view of postwar evidence about the divided Japanese government, was probably not highly likely to have produced the surrender before the November invasion.

In the context of July–early August 1945, the issue of guaranteeing the emperor was not the only impediment to a Japanese surrender. Recall that the Japanese government, pre-Hiroshima, was never sufficiently unified to consistently specify, even in secret, reasonable surrender terms. To make this point emphatically, let me quote from Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo’s secret cable of July 30 (intercepted and decoded by the United States) to Japan’s own ambassador, Naotake Sato, in Moscow: “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.”3 That meant delay, and to wary American officials it could even have looked like a strategy of delay.

And consider Sato’s reply on August 3. He admonished the Foreign Office (in a cable also decoded by the United States): “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 . . . refuse [to receive him and we are wasting valuable time while Japan is being destroyed].”4 Despite Sato’s admonitions, the best the Foreign Office could do, up to the time of the Hiroshima bombing, was to decide to send an envoy who would carry terms. Those terms had not been defined.5

Regrettably, the divided Japanese government, with the “peace” forces usually fearing the militarists and even a coup, could not stipulate, and stick to, reasonable terms until August 10. That was after two A-bombs (although the Nagasaki bombing probably played no significant role) and Soviet entry into the war. Even on August

3. Togo to Sato, July 30, 1945, in No. 1225, August 2, 1945, Magic—Diplomatic Summary, Records of the National Security Agency, Record Group (RG) 457, National Archives (NA), Washington, D.C. These sources were not available to R.J.C. Butow in *Japan’s Decision to Surrender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), on which Alperovitz and Messer sometimes rely.
4. Sato to Togo, August 3, 1945, in No. 1228, August 5, 1945, in Magic—Diplomatic Summary.
5. According to the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS), Prince Konoye 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, D.C.: U.S. GPO), p. 44. That claim is highly suspect. The available interview material from Konoye does not support that statement, and it is also obliquely challenged in Togo’s 1949 interview. See Konoye envelope, Box 9, in Pacific Survey Intelligence Branch, RG 243, NA; and U.S. Army, Far East Command, Military History Section, “Statements of Japanese on World War II,” Statement of Shigenori Togo, No. 50304, Military Records Branch, NA.
10, Japan’s conditional surrender offer required the unprecedented intervention of Emperor Hirohito to push the otherwise divided Japanese cabinet to act to make a formal peace offer. Prior to Hiroshima and Soviet entry, the emperor had never firmly committed himself to plead with the cabinet for such an offer. The A-bomb played a dominant role in his decision.6

TRUMAN’S POTSDAM DIARY AS EVIDENCE OF HIS KNOWLEDGE, EXPECTATIONS, AND HOPES

Truman did believe that Soviet entry could help win the war. But that statement is not the same as Alperovitz’s and Messer’s conclusion that Truman firmly believed at Potsdam that Soviet intervention into the Pacific war (promised by Stalin on July 17 for August 15, 1945) would have an immediate, or virtually immediate, effect of producing Japan’s surrender.

On July 17, after Stalin told Truman that the Soviets would enter the Pacific war on August 15, the president wrote in his diary, “Fini Japs [sic] when that comes about.” What do those words actually mean about Truman’s expectations or hopes? Truman’s comments to his wife the next day (quoted by Alperovitz and Messer) may seem to clarify his diary entry. He told her, “we’ll end the war a year sooner now.” That was a strong hope, even a reasonable expectation, but not a precise prediction about when the war would end: earlier fears were often rather vague, and suggested that the war might stretch into late 1946, or beyond. In that context, did Truman’s diary entry of “Fini Japs [sic]” mean in December 1945 probably? Or maybe November 1945? October? September? He did know that Soviet entry could help; its exact impact was unclear.

On July 18, 1945, after receiving news of the successful Trinity test, the president also wrote in his diary, “Believe Japs [sic] will fold up before Russia comes in. I am sure they will when Manhattan [the A-bomb] appears over their homeland.”

When I first discovered that entry in 1978, I was sure that it greatly clarified matters. I was wrong. To Alperovitz and Messer, however, this evidence seems to clinch their analysis: Truman knew that the A-bomb would be speedily decisive, knew that Soviet entry was unnecessary, and knew that surrender would occur before August 15, Stalin’s promised date for Soviet entry.

But there are some small problems and one very formidable problem with their analysis. If Truman fully and unambivalently knew this, why didn’t he promptly cable his demobilization and anti-inflation agency heads in Washington: “Prepare definitely for peace before 15 August and maybe as early as 1 August” (when the bomb would be ready)? By emphatically alerting these key officials in Washington, he could have avoided the great confusion in the United States with his demobilization and anti-

inflation programs, when the unexpected Japanese peace offer of mid-August caught these agencies largely unprepared to deal immediately with the postwar economy. By examining the larger context of what Truman actually did, and did not do, careful analysts can determine what Truman's diary entries (often scrawled on pieces of paper) meant to him at the time. To ignore this context is to risk misunderstanding Truman’s diary and his own meaning, and to risk distorting evidence by imposing unwarranted interpretations on mushy evidence.

MARSHALL'S INFLUENCE ON THE A-BOMB DECISIONS LEADING TO HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI
Alperovitz and Messer may have misunderstood my treatment of Marshall. My article never claimed, nor meant to imply, that Marshall was the equal of the top two advisers (Byrnes and Stimson) on A-bomb issues in summer 1945. Indeed, Marshall’s uneasiness about using the bombs on non-combatants was largely disregarded. But he did give valuable advice on important military matters—the impact of Soviet entry, the necessity of the invasion, and the possibility of surrender—that helped shape the views of Truman and others about so-called alternative ways of ending the war. Thus, Marshall’s advice powerfully influenced the context for the decisions leading to the A-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

IMPRESSING THE SOVIETs AND OTHER DIPLOMATIC CONSIDERATIONS
I agree that Byrnes desired to end the war before the Soviets entered it and grabbed pieces of the Asian mainland. And I agree that some U.S. leaders preferred, if possible, to end the war without Soviet entry in order to further undercut Soviet claims for a role in the postwar occupation of Japan. But as Alperovitz's own thoughtful book emphasizes, impressing (i.e., intimidating) the Soviets was the major anti-Soviet advantage, among these three anti-Soviet themes, in using the bombs. That still leaves that question of why the A-bombs were used and the importance of anti-Soviet motives in that decision to use the bomb.

Whether anti-Soviet purposes constituted the primary reason for using the bomb (as Alperovitz’s book also argues), or a secondary but necessary reason (as some others think), or a confirming but not essential reason (as I contend) is the general range of the ongoing dispute about why the bombs were used. In these various frameworks, a central issue—discussed in Alperovitz’s and Messer’s letter and dealt with in my reply here—is why so-called alternatives to the bomb were not pursued instead. That dispute, as the preceding pages indicate, rests heavily upon analysis of documents.

7. On the confusion in Washington about the likely impact of the bomb on ending the war, and thus on military procurement, see Undersecretary of War Robert Patterson to George Harrison, August 2, 1945, and Harrison to Patterson, August 8, 1945, Office of the Secretary of War, RG 107, NA.
Moving beyond those documents and the related pieces of the dispute, let me summarize my own interpretation of why the bombs were used.8 They were dropped primarily because, from virtually the beginning of the secret project under Franklin D. Roosevelt, there was an assumption that the weapon would be used and that it was a legitimate weapon. Within that framework, Germany was the initial target. But by late 1944, Germany was expected to surrender before the bomb would be ready and therefore the target easily shifted to Japan. At no time did top-level American leaders seek to avoid the use of the A-bomb. They never searched for alternatives, and the so-called alternatives generally looked too risky; therefore, the alternatives were not pursued. In that context, virtually any risk was too great. In addition, some leaders—certainly Truman, Byrnes, and Stimson—anticipated a “bonus”: intimidating the Soviets (mostly to make them more tractable in Eastern Europe) and gaining other advantages over the Soviets.

In this formulation, there is every reason to believe that the bombs would have been used on Japan even if there had not been a Soviet Union but instead still a tsarist Russia. And the desires for revenge (remember Pearl Harbor and Japanese mistreatment of POWs, Truman urged) may well also have helped confirm the decision to use the bomb. Possibly racism made the acts even easier, but there is every reason to conclude that the weapon would have been used on Germany if that surrender had not occurred so early.

The momentum of assumptions initiated under FDR and inherited by Truman, the easy shift of targets to Japan, the quest to save American lives by ending the war speedily, and the unwillingness to take risks to avoid use of the bombs, together substantially explain why these weapons were dropped on Japan.

In analyzing the 1945 use of the atomic bombs, analysts risk serious error if they frame their conceptions and phrase their questions in the following distorting terms: How could American leaders have overcome their moral scruples and purposely committed this obviously horrible act of intentionally killing well over 100,000 Japanese, mostly non-combatants? What were the hidden ulterior motives that overwhelmed those scruples? In looking for such motives and emphasizing such scruples, these analysts err by imposing their own values on the American leaders of 1945. In doing so, analysts fail to understand those men in their own time, and greatly misunderstand the evolution of attitudes, the growth of national hatreds, and the practice of virtually total war that made the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki relatively easy for American leaders at the time. Indeed, those atomic bombings were also welcomed by most rank-and-file American citizens in 1945, and many regretted that more A-bombs were not used before Japan surrendered.

To understand that world of 1945 does not mean morally acceding, in 1991, to its values. But careful historical analysis does require understanding that 1945 world, and not confusing our wishes for different decisions back then with the reasons for the decisions leading to the use of the atomic bomb.

—Barton J. Bernstein
Stanford, Calif.