



Why We Dropped the Bomb

by GAR ALPEROVITZ

This article is adapted from Gar Alperovitz's Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam, just published by Simon and Schuster. In the book the author uses some 1,400 citations to document the thesis emphasized in the article below. Much of Atomic Diplomacy is based on previously unpublished portions of the diaries of the late Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, Acting Secretary of State Joseph C. Grew, and Admiral William D. Leahy, who was Chief of Staff to President Truman. Mr. Alperovitz is an American Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, England, who is now on leave as legislative director for Senator Gaylord A. Nelson of Wisconsin. Mr. Alperovitz served as special consultant in the preparation of the recent NBC White Paper, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb."—THE EDITORS.

Dear Mr. President,

I think it is very important that I should have a talk with you as soon as possible on a highly secret matter. I mentioned it to you shortly after you took office, but have not urged it since on account of the pressure you have been under. It, however, has such a bearing on our present foreign relations and has such an important effect upon all my thinking in this field that I think you ought to know about it without much further delay.

—SECRETARY OF WAR HENRY L. STIMSON TO PRESIDENT TRUMAN, APRIL 24, 1945

This note was written twelve days after Franklin Delano Roosevelt's death and two weeks before World War II ended in Europe. The following day Secretary Stimson advised President Truman that the "highly secret matter" would have a "decisive" effect upon America's postwar foreign

policy. Stimson then outlined the role the atomic bomb would play in America's relations with other countries. In diplomacy, he confided to his diary, the weapon would be a "master card."

In the spring of 1945, postwar problems unfolded as rapidly as the Allied armies converged in Central Europe. During the fighting which preceded Nazi surrender the Red Army conquered a great belt of territory bordering the Soviet Union. Debating the consequences of this fact, American policy-makers defined a series of interrelated problems: What political and economic pattern was likely to emerge in Eastern and Central Europe? Would Soviet influence predominate? Most important, what power—if any—did the United States have to effect the ultimate settlement on the very borders of Russia?

Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin had attempted to resolve these issues of East-West influence at the February, 1945, Yalta Conference. With the Red

Army clearly in control of Eastern Europe, the West was in a weak bargaining position. It was important to reach an understanding with Stalin before American troops began their planned withdrawal from the European continent. Poland, the first major country intensely discussed by the Big Three, took on unusual significance; the balance of influence struck between Soviet-oriented and Western-oriented politicians in the government of this one country could set a pattern for big-power relationships in the rest of Eastern Europe.

Although the Yalta Conference ended with a signed accord covering Poland, within a few weeks it was clear that Allied understanding was more apparent than real. None of the heads of government interpreted the somewhat vague agreement in the same way. Churchill began to press for more Western influence; Stalin urged less. True to his well-known policy of cooperation and conciliation, Roosevelt attempted to achieve a more definite understanding for Poland and a pattern for East-West relations in Europe. Caught for much of the last of his life between the determination of Churchill and the stubbornness of Stalin, Roosevelt at times fired off angry cables to Moscow, and at others warned London against an "attempt to evade the fact that we placed, as clearly shown in the agreement, somewhat more emphasis . . . [on Soviet-oriented Polish politicians in the government]."

President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, only two months after Yalta. When President Truman met with Secretary Stimson to discuss the "bearing" of the atomic bomb upon foreign relations, the powers were deeply ensnarled in a tense public struggle over the meaning of the Yalta agreement. Poland had come to symbolize all East-West relations. Truman was forced to pick up the tangled threads of policy with little knowledge of the broader, more complex issues involved.

Herbert Feis, a noted expert on the period, has written that "Truman made up his mind that he would not depart from Roosevelt's course or renounce his ways." Others have argued that "we tried to work out the problems of the peace in close cooperation with the Russians." It is often believed that American policy followed a con-

ciliatory course, changing—in reaction to Soviet intransigence—only in 1947 with the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. My own belief is somewhat different. It derives from the comment of Mr. Truman's Secretary of State, James F. Byrnes, that by early autumn of 1945 it was "understandable" that Soviet leaders should feel American policy had shifted radically after Roosevelt's death: It is now evident that, far from following his predecessor's policy of cooperation, shortly after taking office President Truman launched a powerful foreign policy initiative aimed at reducing or eliminating Soviet influence in Europe.



The ultimate point of this study is not, however, that America's approach to Russia changed after Roosevelt. Rather it is that the atomic bomb played a role in the formulation of policy, particularly in connection with President Truman's only meeting with Stalin, the Potsdam Conference of late July and early August, 1945. Again, my judgment differs from Feis's conclusion that "the light of the explosion 'brighter than a thousand suns' filtered into the conference rooms at Potsdam only as a distant gleam." I believe new evidence proves not only that the atomic bomb influenced diplomacy, but that it determined much of Mr. Truman's shift to a tough policy aimed at forcing Soviet acquiescence to American plans for Eastern and Central Europe.

The weapon "gave him an entirely new feeling of confidence," the President told his Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson. By the time of Potsdam, Mr. Truman had been advised on the role of the atomic bomb by both Secretary Stimson and Secretary of State Byrnes. Though the two men differed as to tactics, each urged a tough line. Part of my study attempts to define how closely Truman followed a subtle policy outlined by Stimson, and to what extent he followed the straightforward advice of Byrnes that the bomb (in Mr. Truman's words) "put us in a position to dictate our own terms at the end of the war."

Stalin's approach seems to have been cautiously moderate during the brief few months here described. It is per-

haps symbolized by the Soviet-sponsored free elections which routed the Communist Party in Hungary in the autumn of 1945. I do not attempt to interpret this moderation, nor to explain how or why Soviet policy changed to the harsh totalitarian controls characteristic of the period after 1946.

The judgment that Truman radically altered Roosevelt's policy in mid-1945 nevertheless obviously suggests a new point of departure for interpretations of the cold war. In late 1945, General Dwight D. Eisenhower observed in Moscow that "before the atom bomb was used, I would have said, yes, I was sure we could keep the peace with Russia. Now I don't know. . . People are frightened and disturbed all over. Everyone feels insecure again." To what extent did postwar Soviet policies derive from insecurity based upon a fear of America's atom bomb and changed policy? I stop short of this fundamental question, concluding that further research is needed to test Secretary Stimson's judgment that "the problem of our satisfactory relations with Russia [was] not merely connected with but [was] virtually dominated by the problem of the atomic bomb."

Similarly, I believe more research and more information are needed to reach a conclusive understanding of why the atomic bomb was used. The common belief is that the question is closed, and that President Truman's explanation is correct: "The dropping of the bombs stopped the war, saved millions of lives." My own view is that available evidence shows the atomic bomb was not needed to end the war or to save lives—and that this was

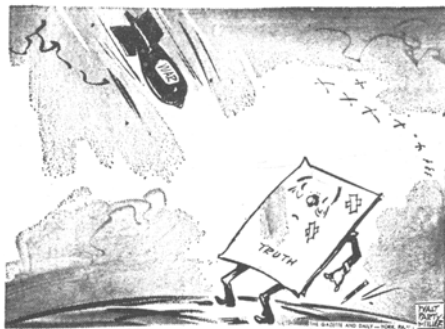
understood by American leaders at the time.

General Eisenhower recently recalled that in mid-1945 he expressed a similar opinion to the Secretary of War: "I told him I was against it on two counts. First, the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing. Second, I hated to see our country be the first to use such a weapon. . ." To go beyond the limited conclusion that the bomb was unnecessary is not possible at present.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the decision to use the atomic bomb is that the President and his senior political advisers do not seem ever to have shared Eisenhower's "grave misgivings." They simply assumed that they would use the bomb, never really giving serious consideration to not using it. Hence, to state in a precise way the question, "Why was the atomic bomb used?" is to ask why senior political officials did *not* seriously question its use, as General Eisenhower did.

The first point to note is that the decision to use the weapon did not derive from overriding military considerations. Despite Mr. Truman's subsequent statement that the weapon "saved millions of lives," Eisenhower's judgment that it was "completely unnecessary" as a measure to save lives was almost certainly correct. This is not a matter of hindsight; *before the atomic bomb was dropped each of the joint Chiefs of Staff advised that it was highly likely that Japan could be forced to surrender "unconditionally," without use of the bomb and without an invasion.* Indeed, this characterization of the position taken by the senior military advisers is a conservative one.

General George C. Marshall's June 18 appraisal was the most cautiously phrased advice offered by any of the Joint Chiefs: "The impact of Russian entry on the already hopeless Japanese may well be the decisive action levering them into capitulation. . ." Admiral William D. Leahy was absolutely certain there was no need for the bombing to obviate the necessity of an invasion. His judgment after the fact was the same as his view before the bombing: "It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material



Partymiller in The York (Pa.) Gazette and Daily

Always the First Casualty

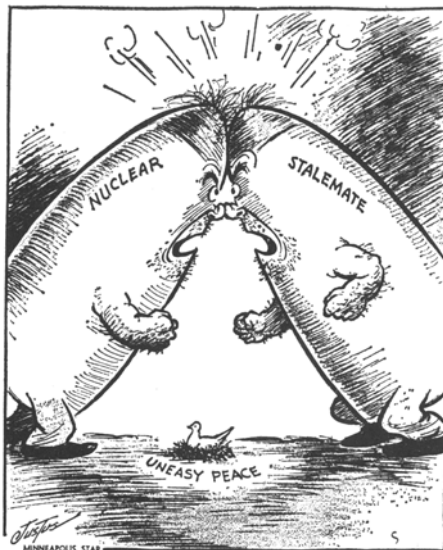
assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender. . .” Similarly, through most of 1945, Admiral Ernest J. King believed the bomb unnecessary, and Generals Henry H. Arnold and Curtis E. LeMay defined the official Air Force position in this way: Whether or not the atomic bomb should be dropped was not for the Air Force to decide, but explosion of the bomb was not necessary to win the war or make an invasion unnecessary.

Similar views prevailed in Britain long before the bombs were used. General Hastings Ismay recalls that by the time of Potsdam, “for some time past it had been firmly fixed in my mind that the Japanese were tottering.” Ismay’s reaction to the suggestion of the bombing was, like Eisenhower’s and Leahy’s, one of “revulsion.” And Churchill, who as early as September, 1944, felt that Russian entry into the war with Japan was likely to force capitulation, has written: “It would be a mistake to suppose that the fate of Japan was settled by the atomic bomb. Her defeat was certain before the first bomb fell. . .”

The military appraisals made before the weapons were used have been confirmed by numerous post-surrender studies. The best known is that of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey. The Survey’s conclusion is unequivocal: “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.”

That military considerations were not decisive is confirmed—and illuminated—by the fact that the President did not even ask the opinion of the military adviser most directly concerned. General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the Pacific, was simply informed of the weapon shortly before it was used at Hiroshima. Before his death he stated on numerous occasions that, like Eisenhower, he believed the atomic bomb was completely unnecessary from a military point of view.

Although military considerations were not primary, unquestionably political considerations related to Russia played a major role in the decision; from at least mid-May in 1945, Amer-



Justus in The Minneapolis Star

“When We Become Obsolete— Then What?”

ican policy-makers hoped to end the hostilities before the Red Army entered Manchuria. For this reason they had no wish to test whether Russian entry into the war would force capitulation—as most thought likely—long before the scheduled November Allied invasion of Japan. Indeed, they actively attempted to delay Stalin’s declaration of war.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that the atomic bomb was used simply to keep the Red Army out of Manchuria. Given the desperate efforts of the Japanese to surrender, and President Truman’s willingness to offer assurances to the Emperor, it is entirely possible that the war could have been ended by negotiation before the Red Army had begun its attack. But after history’s first atomic explosion at Alamogordo neither the President nor his senior political advisers were interested in exploring this possibility.

One reason may have been their fear that if time-consuming negotiations were once initiated, the Red Army might attack in order to seize Manchurian objectives. But, if this explanation is accepted, once more one must conclude that the bomb was used primarily because it was felt to be politically important to prevent Soviet domination of the area.

Such a conclusion is difficult to accept, for American interests in Manchuria, although historically important

to the State Department, were not of great significance. The further question therefore arises: Were there other political reasons for using the atomic bomb? In approaching this question, it is important to note that most of the men involved at the time who since have made their views public always mention *two* considerations which dominated discussions. The first was the desire to end the Japanese war quickly, which was not primarily a military consideration, but a political one. The second is always referred to indirectly.

In June, for example, a leading member of President Truman’s Advisory Interim Committee’s scientific panel, A. H. Compton, advised against the Franck report’s suggestion of a technical demonstration of the new weapon: Not only was there a possibility that this might not end the war promptly, but failure to make a combat demonstration would mean the “loss of the opportunity to impress the world with the national sacrifices that enduring security demanded.” The general phrasing that the bomb was needed “to impress the world” has been made more specific by J. Robert Oppenheimer. Testifying on this matter some years later he stated that the second of the two “overriding considerations” in discussions regarding the bomb was “the effect of our actions on the stability, on our strength, and the stability of the postwar world.” And the problem of postwar stability was inevitably the problem of Russia. Oppenheimer has put it this way: “Much of the discussion revolved around the question raised by Secretary Stimson as to whether there was any hope at all of using this development to get less barbarous relations with the Russians.”

Vannevar Bush, Stimson’s chief aide for atomic matters, has been quite explicit: “That bomb was developed on time. . .” Not only did it mean a quick end to the Japanese war, but “it was also delivered on time so that there was no necessity for any concessions to Russia at the end of the war.”



In essence, the second of the two overriding considerations seems to have been that a combat demonstration was needed to convince the Russians to ac-

cept the American plan for a stable peace. And the crucial point of this effort was the need to force agreement on the main questions in dispute: the American proposals for Central and Eastern Europe. President Truman may well have expressed the key consideration in October, 1945; publicly urging the necessity of a more conventional form of military power (his proposal for universal military training), in a personal appearance before Congress, the President declared: "It is only by strength that we can impress the fact upon possible future aggressors that we will tolerate no threat to peace..."

If indeed the "second consideration" involved in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the desire to impress the Russians, it might explain the strangely ambiguous statement by Mr. Truman that not only did the bomb end the war, but it gave the world "a chance to face the facts." It would also accord with Stimson's private advice to Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy: "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. Now the thing [to do is] . . . let our actions speak for themselves."

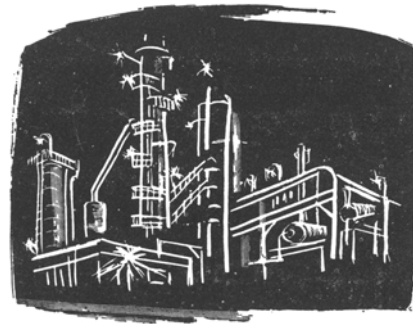
Again, it would accord with Stimson's statement to Mr. Truman that the "greatest complication" would occur if the President negotiated with Stalin before the bomb had been "laid on Japan." It would tie in with the fact that from mid-May, strategy toward all major diplomatic problems was based upon the assumption the bomb would be demonstrated. Finally, it might explain why none of the highest civilian officials seriously questioned the use of the bomb as Eisenhower did; for, having reversed the basic direction of diplomatic strategy *because* of the atomic bomb, it would have been difficult indeed for anyone subsequently to challenge an idea which had come to dominate all calculations of high policy.

It might also explain why the sober and self-controlled Stimson reacted so strongly when General Eisenhower objected to the bombing: "The Secretary was deeply perturbed by my attitude, almost angrily refuting the reasons I gave. . ." Stimson's post-Hiroshima re-

versal, and his repeated references to the gravity of the moral issues raised by the new weapon, are evidence of his own doubts. General Eisenhower's searching criticism may well have touched upon a tender point—namely, Stimson's undoubted awareness that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were to be sacrificed primarily for political, not military, reasons.

At present no final conclusion can be reached on this question. But the problem can be defined with some precision: Why did the American government refuse to attempt to exploit Japanese efforts to surrender? Or, alternatively, why did it refuse to test whether a Russian declaration of war

would force capitulation? Were Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombed primarily to impress the world with the need to accept America's plan for a stable and lasting peace—that is, primarily, America's plan for Europe? The evidence strongly suggests that the view which the President's personal representative offered to one of the atomic scientists in May, 1945, was an accurate statement of policy: "Mr. Byrnes did not argue that it was necessary to use the bomb against the cities of Japan in order to win the war . . . Mr. Byrnes's . . . view [was] that our possessing and demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable in Europe. . ."



Oil Bonanza – for Whom?

by LEONARD BAKER

IN THE mountains of northwestern Colorado, stretching into neighboring Utah and Wyoming, lie some 16,000 square miles of what may be the most valuable land in America. If the United States kept its budget as corporations do — balancing liabilities against assets—the value of the seventy-two per cent of this land held by the Federal government would wipe out the national debt of \$318 billion. Even that, according to Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, may be a conservative estimate.

The land contains oil—some 2,600 billion barrels. At the nation's present consumption rate of three billion bar-

rels a year, that is enough oil to meet U.S. needs for more than 800 years. The oil is locked in a hard material known as shale. For years the procedures required to extract the oil from the shale were too expensive to be worthwhile commercially, but recent research indicates that perhaps by sometime in the 1970s the cost can be reduced to a point comparable with production costs for oil extracted from conventional wells.

Last year Secretary Udall asked a six-man committee to identify and evaluate "the major public policy questions" involved in this huge national resource. The report is now in, and *the* major question about the future of shale oil has indeed been identified. There is no disagreement among the committee members with the proposal that these lands be leased to private

LEONARD BAKER is a former Washington correspondent for Newsday who is now completing a book on Lyndon B. Johnson which Macmillan will publish later this year.
