

Bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Gar Alperovitz and His Critics

KAZUO YAGAMI

Savannah State University

Here Kazuo Yagami, supporting and expanding upon Gar Alperovitz's interpretation in *Atomic Diplomacy* (1965), examines the various arguments regarding the U.S. decision to use the atomic bomb against Hiroshima and Nagasaki toward the end of World War II.

Rationalizing Use of the Atomic Bomb: Rhetoric & Debate

In the argument of why the A-bomb was used against Japan, in general, historians agree that there are multiple reasons for the use of the bombs. Some of these reasons include ending the war as quickly as possible (to save millions of lives), making Stalin tractable, justifying the \$2-billion cost of the Manhattan Project, and engaging in scientific experimentation that, at the same time, would allow for a subtle exhibition of racism against the Japanese. Scholars also agree that, among these possible causes, military and diplomatic considerations—or a combination of the two—ultimately compelled the United States to use the bomb.

In 1965, historian and political economist Gar Alperovitz published a book entitled *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam*. The book had a revolutionary effect on the debate over why the United States used the A-bomb against Japan. Pointing out diplomacy as a primary cause for the use of the A-bomb, Alperovitz challenged the orthodox interpretation that the bomb was used primarily for military reasons—in short, to end the war as quickly as possible so that millions of lives could be saved. In the years since Alperovitz published his views, further publications have created a dichotomy in the debate, with some authors supportive of Alperovitz's stance and others casting critical arguments against it. Alperovitz's book was the catalyst in framing subsequent debate on the use of the A-bomb during World War II.

Alperovitz contends that Japan was already defeated by the early summer of 1945. After realizing the futility of continuing to fight, Japan was attempting to find a way to end the war. The United States intercepted ca-

bles on July 12 and 13, 1945, that indicated the intervention of the Japanese Emperor to attempt to end the war and the dispatch of a Japanese envoy to Moscow to seek mediation (Alperovitz 1995, 232–33). Also, there was almost unanimous consensus among U.S. military officers that Japan was literally defeated by the early summer of 1945. Alperovitz argues that it is, therefore, impossible that President Truman was unaware of the Japanese effort to end the war. Accordingly, Alperovitz raises a series of questions: *Why did Truman have to make the decision to use an A-bomb against Japan in early August? With the planned invasion of Kyushu set for November 1, why did the bomb have to be used three months earlier? Why didn't the United States make an effort to investigate the seriousness of Japan in their seeking of peace? Why didn't the United States modify the demand of unconditional surrender? Why didn't Truman wait for Soviet entry to the war against Japan?* Considering the circumstances, Alperovitz argues that the combined effects of the Soviet entry into the war against Japan and the modification of unconditional surrender would almost definitely have made Japan stop fighting. Why didn't Truman try any or all of these alternatives rather than authorize use of the A-bomb?

To Alperovitz, the reason is obvious: When the A-bomb became available, the United States shifted its goal from ending the war with Soviet entry to ending the war without Soviet entry. The war became winnable for the United States with virtually no loss of American lives. Soviet entry to the war, therefore, became unnecessary to save the potential loss of American lives. From that point onward, instead of being a military tool to end the war, the A-bomb became a tool of diplomatic leverage for the United States in managing Stalin in the postwar settlement of Eastern Europe and Asia. Alperovitz argues that this was the beginning of the period of “atomic diplomacy” that shaped the early stage of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In his well-researched book, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939–1956*, David Holloway (1996) reaches a similar conclusion to that of Alperovitz. He admits that the bomb was originally developed for military purposes. It was not a matter of whether but when to use it. Like Alperovitz, Holloway contends that the successful A-bomb explosion at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945, changed the purpose of the use of the A-bomb. Soviet entry into the war became less desirable and less urgent for the United States. Holloway sees this as a turning point in U.S. policy regarding the A-bomb. From that point in July until the actual bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a diplomatic race with regard to how and when to obtain Japan's surrender. Although the United States wanted to end the war before Soviet entry, the Soviet Union wanted to ensure the war would not be over before their entry. Holloway argues that each side conducted the diplomatic ma-

neuvering necessary to achieve its own goal. While Truman was trying to postpone the Postdam meeting, Stalin was making every effort to speed up the preparation of the Soviet forces for the war entry. It is clear to Holloway, therefore, that by the time of the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, there was a shaky justification for military use of the A-bomb but a firm one for diplomacy.

Martin Sherwin does not deny the diplomatic aspect of the use of the A-bomb. He disagrees, however, with Alperovitz's and Holloway's assertion that atomic diplomacy was a primary cause for the use of the A-bomb. In *A World Destroyed* (1975), Sherwin argues that the diplomatic aspect of the use of the bomb was secondary to the military aspect. According to Sherwin, the Manhattan Project was initiated by Franklin Roosevelt only for the sake of developing a new weapon for military use. Although he admits that it was undeniable there was talk among policymakers, including Truman, about the diplomatic ramification of the use of the A-bomb, Sherwin points out that, in their minds, such talk never became central. Instead, they never questioned the military use of the A-bomb when the bomb became available (Walker 1990, 100).

When Truman assumed the presidency, Sherwin argues that, like other policymakers, he did not find any compelling reason to question the military use of the A-bomb. Instead Truman found compelling reasons to use it. First, the A-bomb was legitimate, since Germany would have used the A-bomb if they had developed it first. Second, the use of the A-bomb would have a profound impact on Japanese leaders with regard to their decision to surrender. Third, there was strong public support for and expectation of the use of the A-bomb by the Truman administration. Finally, there had to be a justification for the use of \$2 billion of taxpayers' money spent to develop the bomb. Thus, Sherwin concludes, Truman did not see any reasons to hesitate from using the A-bomb but saw only compelling reasons to use it (1975, 203).

Although admitting that Truman did not see any other choice except the use of the A-bomb, Sherwin, nevertheless sees it regrettable that the Truman administration did not give serious consideration to any alternative. Particularly in his view, modifying the unconditional-surrender terms was worth consideration. According to Sherwin, such modification would have made the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki unnecessary and indefensible (1975, 238; see also Walker 1990, 101).

Barton Bernstein (1995) shares Sherwin's view on why the A-bomb was used against Japan. He contends that the A-bomb was considered a legitimate weapon to use against an enemy. This assumption was neither examined nor challenged under President Franklin Roosevelt. According to Bernstein, Truman inherited this assumption and saw no reason to question it. Instead, he considered the bomb desirable. Like Sherwin, Bernstein

raises several factors which had a compelling effect on Truman's decision to use the A-bomb: ending the war on American terms; avoiding the dreaded invasion of Japan; punishing the Japanese for Pearl Harbor; extracting revenge for the Japanese mistreatment of American POWs; fulfilling bureaucratic needs; responding to the wish of the American public; and intimidating the Soviets, thereby making them tractable in Eastern Europe in the postwar era (1995, 229).

With these factors, Bernstein asserts that the use of the atomic bomb against Japan might well have been inevitable even if the Bolsheviks had never taken power and the Soviet Union had never been formed (1995, 230). He emphasizes that U.S. policymakers indeed did not see any reason to refrain from using the bomb against Japan. They used it primarily to end the war and to save American lives.

Regarding Alperovitz's support of the diplomatic causal explanation for the use of the A-bomb, although Bernstein agrees that the policymakers hoped that the bomb would bring diplomatic advantage when dealing with the Soviet Union in the postwar era, to him it was rather a "bonus." Bernstein accepts that the use of the A-bomb had the effect to intensify the Cold War but did not cause it.

Concerning the alternatives for the use of the A-bomb, Bernstein differs from Sherwin. He does not see any reason to blame the Truman administration for not trying the alternatives. Bernstein argues that the most crucial key regarding the issue of alternatives to the use of the A-bomb is that insisting on the idea of using alternatives to obtain the Japanese surrender before November 1—with the exception of non-combat demonstration—represents not *pre-* but *post-*Hiroshima and Nagasaki thinking (1995, 235). In the period before the bombings, the alternatives were not considered as alternatives but as "strategies" to obtain Japanese surrender before the planned November 1 invasion. Bernstein emphasizes that "avoiding the use of the bomb was never a real concern for the policymakers" (235). To imply that before Hiroshima the policymakers saw those various approaches as the alternatives to the use of the A-bomb, he contends, is a "distortion" of history.

From this discussion, one key question emerges to help understand where the differences in viewpoints between Alperovitz and those who challenge his diplomatic interpretation come from in their assessment on the issue of the use of the A-bomb. That is the question of whether, as Sherwin and Bernstein assert, Truman truly did not have any compelling reasons to refrain from using the bomb or to question using it.

As stated earlier, Bernstein points out that Truman inherited from Roosevelt the assumption that the A-bomb was considered a legitimate weapon to use against the enemy and therefore never questioned its use. What makes accepting Bernstein's assertion difficult is that he ignores the

quite different circumstances Truman was facing in his diplomacy with the Soviet Union. First, by the time Truman became president, Japan had almost totally lost its capability to keep fighting. The only question that needed to be asked was when Japan was going to surrender. Second, as Alperovitz points out, Japan was attempting to find a way to get out of the war. Truman and other policymakers knew this fact through the intercepted cables from Japan. It strains credibility to think that these changes in circumstantial conditions would not have caused Truman to question the use of the A-bomb and to think that he was as much compelled to use it as he would have been without those conditions.

Concluding Why the Atomic Bomb Was Used: For Diplomacy

Ultimately, then, why was the A-bomb used? Why did it have to be used in early August when the invasion of Kyushu was set for November 1? If the Japanese were already defeated early in the summer of 1945, it does not make any sense to claim that by using the A-bomb three months earlier the United States could somehow save “millions” of lives. To Alperovitz, an answer to the question is diplomacy. A careful analysis of the circumstantial conditions supports Alperovitz. If one looks into how the related events unfolded between late 1943 to shortly before August 6, 1945, the use of the bomb in early August is well explainable. From the Tehran Conference (November–December 1943) to the Yalta Conference (February 1945), Stalin repeated his intention of entering the war against Japan roughly three months after the defeat of Germany. Germany was defeated on May 9, 1945, making the Soviet entry more likely sometime in early August. The successful test of the A-bomb came on July 16, 1945, rendering Soviet entry undesirable for the United States. The major concern of the United States thus shifted from bringing the Soviets into the war to cut down the number of potential American casualties to ending the war without Soviet entry. There had to be, however, two weeks or so for the bomb to be ready for actual use. So the earliest day for the use of the bomb had to be early August. The bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6. It was fortunate for the United States that the Soviet entry came two days later.

Historians often point out that there was no necessity or justification for the use of the second bomb. It was puzzling even to those who justified the use of the first bomb for a military purpose. If one assumes, however, that Truman used the A-bomb for a diplomatic purpose, nothing could be easier to explain than the use of the second bomb. The use of the second bomb actually makes a diplomatic interpretation of the use of the A-bomb more credible. On August 8, only two days after the bombing of Hiroshima, Manchuria had fallen under Soviet control. There was no clear signal from Japan indicating its surrender. Naturally the entry of Soviet troops into Ja-

pan became a grave concern at this point to U.S. policymakers. Thus, the second bomb became necessary; it was dropped on August 9 on Nagasaki. Japan officially announced its intention to surrender on August 10. It is difficult to dispute, therefore, that the analysis of how events unfolded from a diplomatic perspective makes far more sense than asserting that Truman used the A-bomb because to him it was just another weapon to be used for military purposes.

Bernstein contends that Truman was not sure that Japan would surrender even with the use of the A-bomb. In fact, Bernstein points out that Truman and other policymakers were surprised with Japan's unexpectedly speedy response on August 10 to indicate Japan's peace effort (1995, 227). According to Bernstein, this was a clear indication that the only reason Truman had for the use of the bomb was to end the war sometime before November 1 to save the potential casualties which the United States would suffer if the planned invasion of Japan took place. Truman did not consider ending the war before Soviet entry.

If Bernstein is right, however, one has to ask: *Why, then, did Truman order the dropping of the bombs on August 6 and 9, around the dates on which the Soviet entry was expected? Was it just a coincidence? Why didn't Truman wait for another week or a month, since three months remained before November? What was the possible intended gain for the United States?* Here again, the only possible explanation is diplomatic gain. The bomb was dropped in early August in order to end the war before Soviet entry.

Concerning the moral question over use of the A-bomb, those who support Truman's decision do not see any reason to condemn him morally. The contention they make is that World War II was a total war. Mass killing was commonly used as a war tactic by almost all major powers, including the United States. Between March 9 and 10, 1945, for example, the U.S. air raids against Tokyo alone killed 80,000 to 100,000 civilians (Dower 1986, 40). Bernstein points out that this concept of a total war gave Truman another reason for not questioning the use of the A-bomb for military purposes. To Truman, the A-bomb was just another weapon to use. Under this interpretation, there are no justifiable grounds for the moral condemnation of killing about 200,000 Japanese in the two cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Bernstein contends that it is appropriate to judge and condemn bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki from today's moral standards. But to attribute those same standards to the policymakers, the military officers, and the citizens of the United States during World War II is a distortion of history of the war (1995, 269). Bernstein's contention seems correct and difficult to dispute. One has to note, however, that his assertion is correct only under the assumption that the A-bomb was used for military purposes.

The Nazi Holocaust overseen by Hitler and the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese military officers were condemned as war crimes not because of the mass killing but because they were carried out for non-military purposes. By the same token, Alperovitz condemns the use of the A-bomb on Japan not because of the great number of people who were killed but because they were sacrificed for a non-military purpose. It is, therefore, unjustifiable to categorize the mass killings in Hiroshima or Nagasaki, which happened to be carried out by one new weapon, as following the same pattern of many other cases. Indeed, such categorization is a “distortion” of the history of World War II.

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