

# Reconsidering the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States: Approaching the Issue from the Standpoints of Objectives and Efficacy\*

CHIJIWA Yasuaki\*\*

---

## Abstract

This study focuses on the controversies surrounding the United States' use of nuclear weapons (dropping the atomic bombs) against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By approaching this issue from the “standpoints of objectives” and “standpoints of efficacy,” this paper will disentangle the complicated debates and help to deepen our understanding of the process of ending the Pacific War and the issue of nuclear use as a historical problem between postwar Japan and the United States.

Within the discourse surrounding the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States, the theory that the bombings were primarily aimed at intimidating the Soviet Union and the theory that Soviet entry into the war against Japan was a direct factor in Japan's surrender, do not necessarily need to be paired together. Nor do the theories that the use of nuclear weapons was primarily aimed at minimizing the costs of war and the theory that the use of nuclear weapons was a direct factor in Japan's surrender. In fact, based on recent research and newly declassified documents, it is possible to examine the theory that the use of nuclear weapons was primarily aimed at minimizing the costs of war from the standpoint of objectives, and the theory that Soviet entry into the war against Japan was a direct factor in Japan's surrender from the standpoint of efficacy.

On May 27, 2016, Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to visit Hiroshima, marking a pivotal moment in the addressing of the issue. In light of this, it is necessary to move beyond emotional debates and conduct objective analysis of the use of nuclear weapons as an example of failed war termination policy.

---

## Introduction

In this paper I examine debates surrounding the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States.

In 2023, memes were posted on social media linking the atomic bombing of Japan to the U.S. “*Barbie*” movie. The social media accounts for the movie sparked public outrage when they responded favorably to some of these posts, and the movie's distributor, Warner Bros., was subsequently forced to issue an apology. This highlighted once again, 78 years after the end of World War II, the ongoing sensitivity surrounding the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States.

---

\* Originally published in Japanese in *Anzenhoshō Senryaku Kenkyū* [Security & Strategy], vol. 4, no. 1 (December 2023). Some parts have been updated.

\*\* Senior Fellow, National Security Policy Division, Center for Military History, NIDS

The uniqueness of the conclusion of the Pacific War lies in the fact that it involved the first-ever use of nuclear weapons in combat. Within the span of four days, two cities were obliterated along with their residents, with hostilities ending eight days after the first atomic bombing. Even in recent years, debates concerning the meaning of the use of nuclear weapons in the process of terminating the war have continued to unfold.<sup>1</sup>

The debate among historians on this issue has, however, become increasingly complex. In this paper I seek to disentangle the complex debates on the topic by approaching the issue from the standpoints of objectives and efficacy (hereinafter the “Objectives Standpoint” and “Efficacy Standpoint”). In doing so, my aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of both the processes leading to the conclusion of the Pacific War and the issue of nuclear weapon use as a historical problem impacting postwar Japan-U.S. relations.

Past research and debates on this issue give the impression that little clear distinction is made between evaluating the use of nuclear weapons from the Objectives Standpoint and the Efficacy Standpoint. The so-called “Atomic Diplomacy Theory” posits that the United States used its nuclear weapons with the intention of intimidating the Soviet Union with an eye to the postwar world. In this paper I categorize this view as one focused on the Objectives Standpoint. The Atomic Diplomacy Theory has often tended to be debated in a way that aligns, from the Efficacy Standpoint, with the argument that Soviet actions were a crucial factor leading to Japan’s acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration (hereinafter the “Soviet Factor Theory”).<sup>2</sup> Similarly the argument that the atomic bombings were conducted to end the war swiftly and thereby prevent the loss of life that would have otherwise occurred (hereinafter the “Cost Minimization Theory”), has often been presented in alignment with the theory that the use of nuclear weapons was a direct factor in Japan’s surrender (hereinafter the “Nuclear Factor Theory”).<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the abovementioned pairing of the Atomic Diplomacy Theory with the Soviet Factor Theory, and the Cost Minimization Theory with the Nuclear Factor Theory, in this paper I bring attention to the pairing of the Cost Minimization Theory with the Objectives Standpoint and the Soviet Factor Theory with the Efficacy Standpoint. I also examine whether the Cost Minimization Theory can truly be used to justify the atomic bombings.

## 1. The Use of Nuclear Weapons by the United States and Japan’s Reaction

Let us first take a close look at the United States’ use of nuclear weapons and Japan’s reaction to it.

At a press conference on January 24, 1943, held following the Casablanca Conference, President Franklin D. Roosevelt indicated that the United States viewed the militarism of Japan (which had directly attacked the United States with its surprise strike on Pearl Harbor) as a threat

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Gordin and G. John Ikenberry, eds., *The Age of Hiroshima* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Hasegawa Tsuyoshi, *Anto: Sutarin, Toruman to Nihon Kofuku* [Secret Feud: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan] (Tokyo: Chuokoron-Shinsha, 2006). \*New edition published by Misuzu Shobo in 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Asada Sadao, “Genbaku Toka no Shogeki to Kofuku no Kettei [The Shock of the Atomic Bombing and the Decision to Surrender]” in *Taiheiyo Senso no Shuketsu: Ajia-Taiheiyo no Sengo Keisei* [The End of the Pacific War: Formation of Postwar Asia-Pacific], ed. Hosoya Chihiro, Iriye Akira, Goto Kenichi, and Hatano Sumio (Tokyo: Kashiwa Shobo, 1997), pp. 195–221; and Asada Sadao, “‘Genbaku Gaikosetsu’ Hihan: ‘Shinwa’ to Tabu wo Koete (1949–2009-nen) [A Critique of the ‘Atomic Diplomacy Theory’: Beyond the ‘Myths’ and Taboos (1949–2009)],” *Doshisha Hogaku* [Doshisha Law Review], vol. 60, no. 6 (January 2009), pp. 1–81.

on par with Nazism, and announced a policy of seeking the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers. Even after its own impending military defeat became evident in 1945, Japan continued to fight, and it was estimated that if an invasion of Japan's home islands was launched, U.S. battle deaths in the invasion could reach as high as 40,000.<sup>4</sup>

Such concerns led to the emergence of the idea within the U.S. Department of State of modifying the unconditional surrender policy and issuing an ultimatum to Japan. Discussions about this culminated in a memorandum concerning an ultimatum submitted by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson to President Harry S. Truman on July 2, 1945, and then the initial draft of the Potsdam Declaration.<sup>5</sup> A clause permitting the preservation of Japan's emperor system was included in the initial draft, but both Truman and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes feared that Japan's military could become emboldened by this and demand further concessions, thereby prolonging the war. As a result, the clause was ultimately removed, and in the actual Potsdam Declaration, the possibility of preserving the emperor system was only hinted at, with no guarantees.<sup>6</sup>

After the success of the first U.S. nuclear test on July 16, and assurances on July 17 at the Potsdam Conference from Joseph V. Stalin, premier of the Soviet Union, about the Soviet entry into the war against Japan, the incentive for the United States to make any further concessions to Japan diminished. Despite humanitarian concerns and the risk of increasing Soviet influence in postwar East Asia, the test's success and Soviet involvement promised reduced U.S. military casualties. With the use of nuclear weapons now an option, the United States, aiming to minimize Soviet influence after the war, announced the Potsdam Declaration to the press on July 26 without seeking Stalin's signature.<sup>7</sup>

Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs learned of the issuance of the Potsdam Declaration through radio broadcasts on July 27. As this fact indicates, the declaration was not issued as an official diplomatic document.

Less than two weeks later, on August 6, the United States dropped an atomic bomb over Hiroshima.

Truman's announcement of the atomic bombing was communicated to the Japanese side at about 1:00 a.m. on August 7. It took two days after the nuclear attack to confirm it, however, and Japan's Supreme War Council convened a day later, on August 9.

Before this, in the early hours of August 9, the Soviet Union entered the war against Japan.

The extent to which the use of nuclear weapons by the United States was a decisive factor in

---

<sup>4</sup> Douglas J. MacEachin, *The Final Months of the War With Japan: Signals Intelligence, U.S. Invasion Planning, and the A-Bomb Decision* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> "The Secretary of War (Stimson) to the President, July 2, 1945," U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference)* Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), pp. 888–894; Henry Lewis Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1947, [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/japan/stimson\\_harpers.pdf](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/japan/stimson_harpers.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Barton J. Bernstein, "Kensho: Genbaku Toka Kettei made no 300-nichi" [Examination: The 300 Days Leading Up to the Decision to Drop the Atomic Bombs], *Chuokoron* no. 1318 (February 1995), p. 400; Herbert Feis, *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 175–176; Robert P. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), p. 77.

<sup>7</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman: Years of Decisions* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1955), pp. 402–403.

ending the Pacific War has long been a subject of debate among historians. Diplomatic historian Asada Sadao has focused his attention on records such as the *Shusen Shiroku* (historical record of the end of the war), which was compiled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the war. According to the *Shusen Shiroku*, Foreign Minister Togo Shigenori met with Emperor Hirohito on the “morning” of August 8.<sup>8</sup> During the meeting, Togo advised the emperor that “The enemy’s announcement regarding the new bomb that was intercepted yesterday, the 7th, and other matters relating to this, as well as the dropping of the new bomb, should serve as an opportunity for making the decision to end the war.” The emperor responded by saying “The use of this type of weapon makes the continuation of the war increasingly impossible, and missing the opportunity to end the war under favorable conditions would be unacceptable, so it is my hope that the war will be brought to an end as swiftly as possible.”<sup>9</sup>

After meeting with Emperor Hirohito, Togo requested that Prime Minister Suzuki Kantaro convene the Supreme War Council. According to the *Shusen Shiroku*, Togo told Suzuki that the reason for convening the meeting was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.<sup>10</sup> It is also mentioned in the *Shusen Shiroku* that the meeting was not held on August 8 because “a Council member was unavailable on that day,” and it was therefore postponed until the 9th.<sup>11</sup>

According to the memoirs of Sakomizu Hisatsune, chief secretary of the Cabinet at the time, Suzuki told him on the night of the 8th that “Now that it has been confirmed that the bomb dropped on Hiroshima was an atomic bomb, I would like to express my views on ending the war at tomorrow’s Cabinet meeting. Can I ask you to make the necessary preparations?”<sup>12</sup> Emphasizing these discussions (which took place before the Soviet entry into the war against Japan in the early hours of the 9th) as a key piece of evidence for his argument, Asada argues that it is extremely unlikely that Japan would have surrendered in August 1945 without the atomic bombings.<sup>13</sup>

Among the above events described in the *Shusen Shiroku*,<sup>14</sup> one point that stands out is that the Supreme War Council meeting in response to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was postponed from the 8th to the 9th due to the unavailability of one of the members. Asada sharply criticizes this decision, questioning how anyone could really be “unavailable” in such a moment of great urgency.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, historian Hasegawa Tsuyoshi, who emphasizes the Soviet entry into the war over the atomic bombings as being the decisive factor in Japan’s acceptance of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., *Shusen Shiroku* (ge) [Historical Record of the End of the War (vol. 2)] (Tokyo: Shimbun Gekkansha, 1952), p. 535.

<sup>9</sup> Quotations based on Imperial Household Agency, *Showa Tenno Jitsuroku* (9) [The Annals of Emperor Hirohito (vol. 9)] (Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki, 2016), pp. 748–749.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., *Shusen Shiroku* (ge) [Historical Record of the End of the War (vol. 2)], p. 560.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 536.

<sup>12</sup> Sakomizu Hisatsune, *Dai Nippon Teikoku Saigo no Yonkagetsu: Shusen Naikaku “Futokorogatana” no Shogen* [The Last Four Months of the Empire of Japan: Testimony of the “Confidant” of the War Cabinet] (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 2015), p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> Asada, “Genbaku Toka no Shogeki to Kofuku no Kettei [The Shock of the Atomic Bombing and the Decision to Surrender],” pp. 199, 213–214.

<sup>14</sup> Information about the events concerned is likely based on Togo’s testimony on May 18, 1949. “Togo Chinjutsuroku (10) [Togo Testimony Records (10)],” in *Shusen Kosaku no Kiroku* (ge) [Records of Maneuvering for Ending the War (vol. 2)], ed. Kurihara Ken and Hatano Sumio (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1986), p. 356.

<sup>15</sup> Asada, “Genbaku Toka no Shogeki to Kofuku no Kettei [The Shock of the Atomic Bombing and the Decision to Surrender],” p. 199; Iokibe Makoto, *Nichibei Senso to Sengo Nippon* [The Japan-U.S. War and Postwar Japan] (Osaka: Osaka Shoseki, 1989), p. 118.

Potsdam Declaration, conversely interprets this postponement as reflecting the mindset of Japan's leaders who, feeling that the situation was not yet urgent, believed it would be fine to postpone the Supreme War Council meeting if a member was unavailable.<sup>16</sup>

So, who among the six members of the Supreme War Council—Prime Minister Suzuki, Foreign Minister Togo, War Minister Anami Korechika, Navy Minister Yonai Mitsumasa, Chief of the Army General Staff Umezu Yoshijiro, and Chief of the Navy General Staff Toyoda Soemu—was unavailable? Neither Asada nor Hasegawa have identified who it was. I will examine this issue below, but before I do, I must point out a critical error in the *Shusen Shiroku*.

As mentioned above, the *Shusen Shiroku* records that Emperor Hirohito and Togo discussed, on the “morning” of August 8, how the atomic bombing served as an opportunity to bring the war to an end as swiftly as possible. The *Showa Tenno Jitsuroku* (the annals of Emperor Hirohito), published in 2014, states that the meeting between the emperor and Togo took place not in the morning, but at “4:40 p.m.”<sup>17</sup> Since that still means the meeting occurred on August 8, before the Soviet entry into the war against Japan, one might assume that the exact timing of the meeting is not a matter of great consequence. The timing is in fact, however, a crucially important issue because of another extremely significant event that occurred at noon that same day.

Japan had actually been seeking to end the war through Soviet mediation, and a decision was made on July 10 to send former Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro as a special envoy to the Soviet Union. Even after receiving reports of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Togo, Yonai, and the others were still waiting on August 7 and on the morning of August 8, for a response from the Soviet Union regarding Konoe's mission. At 3:40 p.m. on August 7, Togo wired a final urgent request to Sato Naotake, Japan's ambassador to the Soviet Union, saying, “The situation is becoming increasingly tense. We urgently seek a clear response from the Soviet side. We request your utmost efforts to promptly secure a swift reply from them.”<sup>18</sup> On the 8th, Yonai spoke to Takagi Sokichi, who was engaged in efforts to end the war in his capacity as a Naval General Staff officer and member of the research section of the Navy War College. Yonai said, “I met with the foreign affairs minister yesterday, and it seems that we are yet to receive a telegram [from Ambassador Sato]. Since Stalin only returned from Potsdam on the 5th, and it should take two or three days for the telegram to come through, we should hear something [from the Soviet Union] today or tomorrow.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Hasegawa, *Anto* [Secret Feud], p. 323.

<sup>17</sup> Imperial Household Agency, *Showa Tenno Jitsuroku* (9) [The Annals of Emperor Hirohito(9)], pp. 748–749. Notably, historian Suzuki Tamon had earlier speculated in a paper published in 2006 that Togo's audience with Hirohito occurred in the afternoon. Suzuki Tamon, “Showa 20-nen 8-gatsu Toka no Gozen Kaigi: Genbaku Toka to Soren Sansen no Seijiteki Eikyo no Bunseki [Imperial Conference of August 10, 1945: Analysis of the Political Impacts of the Atomic Bombing and Soviet Entry into the War],” *Nihon Seiji Kenkyu* [Japanese Political Research] vol. 3, no. 1 (January 2006), pp. 75, 87. Also, a grandson of Togo, journalist Togo Shigehiko, published a book in 1993 that included unpublished materials, in which he states, albeit drawing on an unknown source, that Togo's audience with Emperor Hirohito was at 4 p.m. on August 8. Togo Shigehiko, *Sofu Togo Shigenori no Shogai* [The Life of My Grandfather Togo Shigenori] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 1993), p. 378.

<sup>18</sup> “Togo Daijin, Sato Zai‘so’ Taishi-kan Saigo Ofukuden (dai 993-go, Showa 20-nen 8-gatsu nanoka) [Final Telegraph Exchange between Minister Togo and Ambassador to the Soviet Union Sato (no. 993, August 7, 1945)],” in *Shusen Shiroku* (ge) [Historical Record of the End of the War (vol. 2)], ed. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, p. 548.

<sup>19</sup> Takagi Sokichi, “Yonai Kaisho Jikiwa [Direct Account from Navy Minister Yonai]” (August 8, 1945), in *Takagi*

At noon on August 8, the long-awaited telegram from Sato finally arrived,<sup>20</sup> stating that he had secured a meeting with the Soviet commissar of foreign affairs, Vyacheslav M. Molotov, at 5:00 p.m. on August 8, Moscow time (11:00 p.m. on August 8, Japan time). This was about 16 hours before Togo was informed of the Soviet entry into the war against Japan.

Thus, the exact timing of the meeting between Emperor Hirohito and Togo (whether it occurred before or after the arrival of Sato's telegram at noon), has a significant impact on how the record of their meeting should be interpreted.

As revealed in the *Showa Tenno Jitsuroku*, the meeting between Emperor Hirohito and Togo actually took place *after* the telegram arrived. Their meeting was, of course, surely based on the knowledge that the Sato-Molotov meeting in Moscow would take place later that night. Indeed, it would be quite natural to conclude that this information was in fact the very reason why the meeting between the emperor and Togo took place. Hasegawa questions Asada's assumption that it was self-evident that the emperor and Togo would engage in negotiations with the United States and the United Kingdom predicated on acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration.<sup>21</sup> Hasegawa instead argues that their intended negotiating partner at that time was none other than the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> The historian Suzuki Tamon goes a step further, suggesting that the emperor may have instructed Togo to expedite negotiations with the Soviet Union in response to Togo's report, after which Togo asked the lord keeper of the Privy Seal (Kido Koichi) and the prime minister to convene the Supreme War Council.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, given that the keenly awaited Soviet reply might have arrived late that night or in the early hours of the following day, would Japan really have abandoned their Soviet mediation strategy without waiting for only one more day to hear the Soviet response?

Based the chain of events above, it is possible to point out that the Supreme War Council meeting on August 9 might not have been organized in response to the nuclear attack on Hiroshima after all.<sup>24</sup> Even Emperor Hirohito and Togo, who were considered to be members of the "peace faction," cannot be said with certainty to have, as of the 8th, decisively abandoned the strategy of seeking Soviet mediation and resolved to immediately communicate to the United States their acceptance of the terms of the Potsdam Declaration. Instead, they may have been prepared to continue pursuing the Soviet mediation strategy, despite the risk of ultimately having to accept extremely unfavorable terms due to the Allies' possession of nuclear weapons. Based solely on Sakomizu's testimony, it is also unclear how Suzuki's "views on ending the war," which he indicated on August 8, aligned with the strategy of seeking Soviet mediation.

If this was the case, the veracity of the account in the *Shusen Shiroku*, which attributes

---

*Kaigun Shosho Oboegaki* [Memorandums of Rear Admiral Takagi] (Tokyo: Mainichi Shimbunsha, 1979), p. 341.

<sup>20</sup> "Togo Daijin, Sato Zai'so' Taishi-kan Saigo Ofukuden (dai 1530-go, Showa 20-nen 8-gatsu nanoka) [Final Telegraph Exchange between Minister Togo and Ambassador to the Soviet Union Sato]" (no. 1530, August 7, 1945), in *Shusen Shiroku* (ge) [Historical Record of the End of the War (vol. 2)], ed. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, p. 548.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson D. Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Hasegawa, *Anto* [Secret Feud], p. 322.

<sup>23</sup> Suzuki, "Showa 20-nen 8-gatsu Toka no Gozen Kaigi [Imperial Conference of August 10, 1945]," pp. 74–75. The studies by Hasegawa and Suzuki were completed before *Showa Tenno Jitsuroku* was published.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

the postponement of the Supreme War Council meeting to the unavailability of its member, is therefore questionable. In fact, the statement that “a Council member was unavailable on that day,” was deleted from the 1997 reprint of the *Shusen Shiroku*.<sup>25</sup> Although the *Shusen Shiroku* is a primary source, its account of this situation—a juncture that is critical for analyzing the factors that led to Japan’s surrender—cannot be taken at face value.

## 2. The Objectives Standpoint (1): The Atomic Diplomacy Theory

Based on the chain of events described above, I would now like to reexamine the debate surrounding the use of nuclear weapons from the standpoints of objectives and efficacy.

With regard to the objectives of the atomic bombings, there is a longstanding debate between proponents of the so-called orthodox and revisionist perspectives.<sup>26</sup> It could be said, however that what is referred to as “revisionism” in the West is conversely closer to the “orthodox” perspective in Japan, making such terms less meaningful for Japanese participants in the debate. For this reason, I will intentionally avoid the use of these labels in this paper and focus instead on the substance of each argument, referring to what is known as the orthodox perspective as the Cost Minimization Theory, and what is known as the revisionist perspective as the Atomic Diplomacy Theory. For convenience’s sake, I will address the Atomic Diplomacy Theory first.

The Atomic Diplomacy Theory is the argument that the United States knew Japan would surrender even without the use of nuclear weapons, but chose to use them for another reason: to intimidate the Soviet Union, with postwar considerations in mind. Nobel laureate physicist Patrick M.S. Blackett famously stated, “... the dropping of the atomic bombs was not so much the last military act of the second World War, as the first major operation of the cold diplomatic war with

---

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., *Shusen Shiroku* [Historical Record of the End of the War] (reprint) (Tokyo: Kankochō Bunken Kenkyūkai, 1993), p. 536.

<sup>26</sup> For studies from orthodox perspectives, refer to the following: Asada, *Genbaku Toka no Shogeki to Kofuku no Kettei* [The Shock of the Atomic Bombing and the Decision to Surrender]; Len Giovannitti and Fred Freed, *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1965); William Craig, *The Fall of Japan* (New York: Dial Press, 1967); Robert J. C. Butow, *Japan’s Decision to Surrender* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1954); Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Penguin Group, 1999); Michael Kort, *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Robert James Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*; Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*. For studies from revisionist perspectives, refer to the following: Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (vol. 1 and 2) (New York: Vintage Books, 1996); Hasegawa, *Anto* [Secret Feud]; Patrick M. S. Blackett, *Fear, War, and the Bomb* (New York: Whittlesey, 1949); Leon V. Sigal, *Fighting to a Finish: The Politics of War Termination in the United States and Japan, 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). For studies that blend the orthodox and revisionist perspectives, refer to the following: J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan* (New Delhi: Dev Publishers & Distributors, 1997); Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); Feis, *Japan Subdued*; Andrew Rotter, *Hiroshima: The World’s Bomb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Barton J. Bernstein, “Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb, 1941-1945: A Reinterpretation,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 90, no. 1 (Spring 1975); Barton J. Bernstein, “The Perils and Politics of Surrender: Ending the War with Japan and Avoiding the Third Atomic Bomb,” *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 46, no. 1 (February 1977); Barton J. Bernstein, “Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Spring 1995); Lisle A. Rose, *Dubious Victory: The United States and the End of World War II* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1973). For a study that distinguishes between the significance of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, refer to the following: Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko, *The Atomic Bombs and the Origins of the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

Russia now in progress.”<sup>27</sup> The historian Gar Alperovitz later developed this argument further.

The weakness of the Atomic Diplomacy Theory lies in the absence of any conclusive evidence that “atomic diplomacy” was an objective of the bombings. Alperovitz’s research has been criticized for issues such as forced interpretations of source materials and inaccurate citations.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, a number of questions regarding this theory remain unresolved, such as whether merely possessing nuclear weapons, without actually using them, might have been sufficient to intimidate the Soviet Union. One might also wonder whether the United States, in reality, refrained from blatantly threatening the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons for a time after the war. In recent years, the Atomic Diplomacy Theory as posited by Blackett and Alperovitz has increasingly tended to be rejected.

As a result, some researchers have attempted to narrow the scope of the atomic diplomacy argument. Hasegawa, for example, argues that after the success of the first nuclear test, the United States no longer needed Soviet participation in the war against Japan and instead hurried to use nuclear weapons to force Japan to surrender before the Soviets could enter the war against Japan, thereby preventing the expansion of Soviet influence in postwar East Asia.<sup>29</sup> If this were true, however, it is difficult to reconcile with the fact that President Truman still wanted the Soviet Union to enter the war against Japan even after the successful nuclear test.<sup>30</sup>

It also makes it difficult to explain why the United States issued the “Byrnes Note.” The Byrnes Note was the response from Byrnes to an inquiry from Japan regarding its potential acceptance of the terms of the Potsdam Declaration with the added condition that the sovereignty of the emperor be maintained. In the note, Byrnes responded to the Japanese inquiry without answering in the affirmative or negative and instead drafted a reply simply reiterating the terms of the Potsdam Declaration, stating that “From the moment of surrender the authority of the Emperor and the Japanese Government to rule the state shall be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers....” Byrnes secured the agreement of the United Kingdom, China (the Nationalist government based in Chongqing), and the Soviet Union, before sending this response to Japan.<sup>31</sup>

At the time that Japan indicated its potential acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration with the added condition, Soviet forces had already begun invading Manchuria. If the United States had truly wanted to force Japan to surrender as quickly as possible due to U.S. concerns about the Soviet Union, there can be no doubt that it would have either immediately accepted Japan’s added condition or at least deliberated on accepting it, with an eye to preventing the expansion of Soviet power. There is in fact no evidence of such deliberations taking place. Instead, the United States remained uncompromising toward Japan, fully aware that this risked prolonging the war.<sup>32</sup> Rather than moving to facilitate Japan’s surrender as quickly as possible, the United States even went to

---

<sup>27</sup> Blackett, *Fear, War, and the Bomb*, pp. 136–137.

<sup>28</sup> Robert James Maddox, “Gar Alperovitz: Godfather of Hiroshima Revisionism,” in *Hiroshima in History: The Myths of Revisionism*, ed. Robert James Maddox (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Hasegawa, *Anto* [Secret Feud], pp. 234, 239–240, 271.

<sup>30</sup> “Truman Letters to Bess Truman, July 18 and 20, 1945,” in *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman, 1910–1959*, ed. Robert H. Ferrell (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1983), pp. 519–520.

<sup>31</sup> Mainichi Shimbunsha Tosho Henshubu [Mainichi Shimbun Book Editing Department], ed., *Taiheiyo Senso Hishi: Bei Senji Shidosha no Kaiso* [Secret History of the Pacific War: Recollections of American Wartime Leaders] (Tokyo: Mainichi Shimbunsha, 1965), pp. 305–307.

<sup>32</sup> Bernstein, “The Perils and Politics of Surrender,” pp. 24–25.



the effort of seeking Soviet agreement on the Byrnes Note at the risk of providing the Soviets with an opportunity to take advantage of the situation by stalling for time.

The United States would indeed presumably have been seeking to minimize Soviet influence in postwar East Asia as much as possible. It is important to remember, however, that nuclear weapons had never been used in anger before, and it was still uncertain how decisive a weapon they would prove to be in warfare, or even if they would actually detonate after being dropped from an aircraft. The nature of Soviet participation in the war ultimately depended on the Soviets. The United States had no way of knowing the intensity, scope, or duration of any Soviet attacks, nor could it even determine whether the Soviets would actually join the fight.

Stimson noted in his diary on August 9, “The bomb and the entrance of the Russians into the war will certainly have an effect on hastening the victory. But just how much that effect is on how long and how many men we will have to keep to accomplish that victory, it is impossible yet to determine.”<sup>33</sup> This was the situation as seen from the U.S. side.

### 3. The Objectives Standpoint (2): The Cost Minimization Theory

In contrast to the Atomic Diplomacy Theory, the Cost Minimization Theory posits that the atomic bombings were intended to bring the war to an early end, thereby preventing the casualties that would otherwise have occurred.

It is important to note here that even if the Cost Minimization Theory is more supportable than the Atomic Diplomacy Theory, this does not immediately prove the correctness of the use of nuclear weapons from the perspective of cost minimization.

It seems difficult to question the fact that, amid the uncertainties about the effectiveness of atomic bombing and the fulfillment of promises by the Soviet Union, the use of nuclear weapons by the United States was aimed at ending the war early and preventing further casualties. In fact, during the U.S.-U.K. Combined Chiefs of Staff meeting held alongside the Potsdam Conference, the estimated date for ending organized Japanese resistance was set as November 15, 1946 (not 1945).<sup>34</sup> This means that, at that stage, the war was expected to last 15 months longer than it actually did in the end. During those 15 months, many more Allied soldiers would have died at the hands of Japan, and the lives of Allied prisoners of war and non-combatants in the Asia-Pacific region would have continued to be at risk.

The United States sought to end the war early on their own terms, utilizing every means at its disposal to prevent further casualties among its own forces, including the use of nuclear weapons and the Soviet entry into the war.<sup>35</sup> If the war could be ended solely through the use of nuclear weapons, the United States would likely have placed less weight on humanitarian concerns surrounding the use of nuclear weapons than on concerns about the expansion of Soviet influence in postwar East Asia, which would become inevitable with the Soviet entry into the war against

---

<sup>33</sup> Hiroshima: Henry Stimson’s Diary and Papers, Part 9, July 28 thru Aug. 9, 1945, <http://www.doug-long.com/stimson9.htm>; Barton Bernstein, H-Diplo Roundtable on Tsuyoshi Hasegawa’s *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan*, *H-Diplo*, vol. 7, no. 2 (January 2006), <https://issforum.org/roundtables/>, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> “Meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, July 19, 1945,” *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference)* Vol. II, p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> Gideon Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), p. 113.

Japan.

Notwithstanding Japan's heavy responsibility for the war, however, the question remains: were there no alternatives to using nuclear weapons to bring the conflict to an early end?

Alternatives to the use of nuclear weapons, such as an invasion of the Japanese home islands, would certainly have resulted in greater costs for both sides. There is debate about claims that the United States overestimated the number of U.S. casualties that would result from an invasion of Japan's home islands, with those claiming that it was an overestimation referring to it as the "one million casualties myth."<sup>36</sup> Yet the fundamental issue is not whether or not there would have been one million casualties. Even if the resulting casualties had only numbered in the tens of thousands, that still would not have been an easily acceptable figure for a democratic nation. Even conventional bombing and naval blockades, which would have resulted in fewer casualties on the U.S. side than an invasion, would likely have caused tremendous damage to the Japanese side.

Thus, it is difficult to say that military alternatives to the use of nuclear weapons, such as an invasion of Japan's home islands, conventional bombing, or naval blockades, would necessarily have been preferable.

What, then, about diplomatic alternatives to military actions? Would there, for instance, have been a different outcome if the Potsdam Declaration had been issued with different content or in a different format?<sup>37</sup>

First, let us examine the clause about preserving Japan's emperor system that was included in the original draft of the Potsdam Declaration. After the war, Stimson and Under Secretary of State Joseph C. Grew remarked that if the United States had explicitly declared early on that Japan could retain its emperor system, it might have helped to bring the war to an early end.<sup>38</sup> While it is indeed true that the U.S. public held a harsh view of Emperor Hirohito at the time,<sup>39</sup> public opinion can be shifted through persuasion, and governments oftentimes adopt policies that run contrary to the views of the public. Public opinion itself is also subject to change, as U.S. public opinion about Emperor Hirohito in fact subsequently did.

There is, however, some rationality in the idea that a clause on preserving the emperor system could not be issued, at least not in the form of a stand-alone condition. The opposition of Truman and Byrnes to a clause on preserving the emperor system was based on their concern that offering one concession could incentivize the Japanese side to demand further concessions.

The historian Barton J. Bernstein points out that Truman and Byrnes thought that relaxing the terms would instead embolden Japan's military to seek further compromises, thereby prolonging the war.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, on July 16, the former secretary of state Cordell Hull, advised Byrnes

---

<sup>36</sup> Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb"; J. Samuel Walker, "The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update," in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 31.

<sup>37</sup> Historian Robert P. Newman argues that the Potsdam Declaration was appropriate because it was not harsher than what was presented to Germany, but he does not address the possibility of any deficiencies relating to the Declaration. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), p. 629; Joseph Grew, "The War Could Have Been Ended without the Bomb," in *The Atomic Bomb: The Critical Issues*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 31.

<sup>39</sup> *Washington Post*, June 29, 1945.

<sup>40</sup> Bernstein, "Kensho: Genbaku Toka Kettei made no 300-nichi" [Examination: The 300 Days Leading Up to the Decision to Drop the Atomic Bombs], p. 400.

through Grew, that a failure to secure Japan's surrender despite having made a concession about preservation of the emperor system would galvanize the Japanese, while in the United States, there would be a terrible political backlash. Thus, if Japan had then rejected a declaration that included a clause on preserving the emperor system, the U.S. government could have faced harsh domestic criticism for not just risking appearing weak to the enemy, but also failing to achieve its objectives.<sup>41</sup>

Secondly, let us consider the possibility of providing advance warning about the use of nuclear weapons. The historian Herbert Feis argues that the United States should have taken the risk of disclosing the results of the nuclear test.<sup>42</sup> In addition to such a disclosure, the United States surely also had the option of providing a demonstration.

The historian Richard B. Frank argues that a demonstration would not have been effective, given that even after the actual atomic bombings, Japan's military asserted that the United States only had a few more nuclear weapons left in their stockpile.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, one could consider it significant that providing an advance warning or demonstration would have strengthened the Potsdam Declaration as an ultimatum. While nuclear weapons were seen as psychological weapons with the expectation that their use would be psychologically shocking,<sup>44</sup> there is room for debate about whether the threat from an advance warning would have been more effective than the shock from their actual use without any warning.

Thirdly, let us consider what difference it might have made if the Potsdam Declaration had also been signed by Stalin. The United States issued the declaration without obtaining prior approval from the Soviet Union. In response to this, Japan, noting the absence of Stalin's signature on the Potsdam Declaration, became even more deeply committed to the strategy of seeking Soviet mediation.<sup>45</sup>

Had the United States approached the Soviet Union about the matter in advance, it is highly likely that Stalin would have agreed to signing the Potsdam Declaration and having it released prior to entering the war as a way to justify scrapping the Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact.<sup>46</sup> It was Stalin who stood to lose by being excluded from signing the declaration.<sup>47</sup>

Lastly, what if a deadline for accepting the Potsdam Declaration had been set and the declaration had been issued through diplomatic channels? With regard to a deadline for

---

<sup>41</sup> "The Acting Secretary of State to the Secretary of State, July 16, 1945," *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference of Berlin* Vol. II, p. 1267.

<sup>42</sup> Feis, *Japan Subdued*, p. 187.

<sup>43</sup> Frank, *Downfall*, pp. 270–271.

<sup>44</sup> Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb."

<sup>45</sup> Togo Shigenori, *Jidai no Ichimen: Togo Shigenori Gaiko Shuki* [One Aspect of the Era: Diplomatic Notes of Togo Shigenori] (Tokyo: Hara Shobo, 2005), pp. 353–354; Yomiuri Shimbunsha, ed., *Showashi no Tenno* (3) [The Emperor in Showa History (vol. 3)] (Tokyo: Chuokoron Shinsha, 2011), pp. 355–356.

<sup>46</sup> David Holloway, "Jockeying for Position in the Postwar World: Soviet Entry into the War with Japan in August 1945," in *The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisals*, ed. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 174.

<sup>47</sup> While Feis speculates that Stalin would not have agreed to sign the Potsdam Declaration unless its issuance was delayed until after the Soviet entry into the war, this view remains questionable. On the other hand, Feis does acknowledge that if Stalin had signed the declaration, Japan's response to it might have been different. Feis, *Japan Subdued*, p. 96. Boris Slavinsky, *Nisso Senso e no Michi: Nomonhan kara Chishima Senryo made* [USSR-Japan: On the Way to War: A Diplomatic History of 1937-1945], trans. Kato Yukihiko (Tokyo: Kyodo Tsushinsha, 1999), pp. 13–14.

acceptance, the declaration only stated “We shall brook no delay.” Some historians therefore see this as meaning that strictly speaking, the declaration cannot actually be characterized as an ultimatum.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the historian Hatano Sumio points out that, had the declaration had been issued through diplomatic channels, it cannot be ruled out that the assertions of the Allies and the intentions of the Japanese government could have been mutually communicated.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, Frank tends to dismiss outright the possibility that choosing a different path might have led to a different outcome, basing his conclusions on what happened on the path that was actually taken. Frank contends that the fact that the Potsdam Declaration was not issued through diplomatic channels is not a key issue, basing his argument on the absence of evidence that the Japanese side ever seriously discussed the fact that it had not been delivered through such channels.<sup>50</sup> This kind of interpretation remains problematic, as there were in fact Cabinet members, like Minister of Agriculture and Commerce Ishiguro Tadaatsu, who had argued that “The government should not respond to something so unofficial.”<sup>51</sup>

Prime Minister Suzuki’s “*mokusatsu*” statement (to the effect that the declaration would be ignored) is often mentioned in this context. It is perhaps more natural, however, to view this statement simply as part of a response by Suzuki to a reporter’s question, rather than an official rejection of the Potsdam Declaration by the Japanese government. In fact, as of August 2, the British Foreign Office did not consider the “*mokusatsu*” statement to necessarily be the Japan side’s last word on the matter.<sup>52</sup> After all, governments of defeated nations, even when privately prepared to surrender, often outwardly maintain the pretense of continuing to fight wars right up until the last possible moment due to domestic considerations, as was the case with the Pietro Badoglio administration prior to Italy’s World War II surrender.<sup>53</sup>

Truman had said to Stimson that the order for the atomic bombing would remain active until the Japanese side communicated their acceptance of the U.S. side’s final ultimatum.<sup>54</sup> If that were the case, the atomic bombing would have taken place even without Suzuki’s “*mokusatsu*” statement.<sup>55</sup>

The journalist Naka Akira points out that if we accept what Truman said, it leads to an absurd situation where an extremely high-level political judgment—evaluating Japan’s response to the Potsdam Declaration—was to be made by the U.S. bombing squadron commander in the

---

<sup>48</sup> Robert H. Ferrell, ed. *Harry S. Truman and the Bomb: A Documentary History* (Worland: High Plains Publishing Company, 1996), p. 95, footnote 2.

<sup>49</sup> Hatano Sumio, *Saisho Suzuki Kantaro no Ketsudan: “Seidan” to Sengo Nihon* [Prime Minister Suzuki Kantaro’s Decision: The “Sacred Decision” and Postwar Japan] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2015), p. 150.

<sup>50</sup> “Commentary by Frank,” in H-Diplo Roundtable on Tsuyoshi Hasegawa’s *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan*, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Ishiguro Tadaatsu, *Nosei Ochibakago* [Basket for Fallen Leaves of Agricultural Policy] (Tokyo: Oka Shoin, 1956), p. 427.

<sup>52</sup> “Minute from Mr. De La Mare to Mr. Sterndale Bennett [F4839/584/61] August 2, 1945,” No. 596, *Documents on British Policy Overseas Series 1*, Vol. I (The Conference at Potsdam, July-August 1945), ed. Rohan Butler and M.E. Pelly (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1984), p. 1251.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Kecskemeti, *Strategic Surrender: The Politics of Victory and Defeat* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 191.

<sup>54</sup> Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman*, p. 421.

<sup>55</sup> Nishijima Ariatsu, *Genbaku wa Naze Tokasareta ka: Nihon Kofuku wo Meguru Senryaku to Gaiko* [Why Were the Atomic Bombs Dropped? Strategies and Diplomacy Surrounding Japan’s Surrender] (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1971), p. 270; Iokibe, *Nichibei Senso to Sengo Nippon* [The Japan-U.S. War and Postwar Japan], p. 117.

Southwest Pacific responsible for the atomic bombing operation.<sup>56</sup>

It is possible that Japan's response to the Potsdam Declaration may have been different, if one of the approaches outlined above, or a combination of them (the inclusion of a provision permitting the retention of the emperor system alone would likely not have sufficed), had been pursued. It must surely have been possible to understand at the time that doing so could increase the likelihood of Japan accepting the terms of the declaration. During the Potsdam Conference, Stimson actually suggested that it might be possible to bring Japan to surrender by incorporating one of the following three elements into the surrender ultimatum: a clause providing for the retention of the emperor system, an advance warning about the use of nuclear weapons, or Stalin's signature.<sup>57</sup>

Those who justify the use of nuclear weapons in line with the Cost Minimization Theory reject not only the military alternatives to the atomic bombing but also the diplomatic alternatives, based on the various reasons I have discussed above. If a ground invasion of Japan's home islands had actually taken place, however, they might have said something like this: "It was impossible for the emperor to make the decision to surrender. If he had done so, War Minister Anami would surely have refused to sign the imperial rescript, or he would have resigned, forcing the entire Suzuki Cabinet to resign, thus thwarting the moves of the faction in favor of surrender contingent on one condition. The Japanese military's insistence on the four conditions for surrender and its calls for a final battle on the home islands meant that the fall of Tokyo was unavoidable...."

Historian Michael Kort, who, as with some of the aforementioned researchers, argues that the use of nuclear weapons was justified, contends that the reinforcement of the Japanese military for the final defense of Japan's home islands (Operation *Ketsugo*) is evidence that Japan was determined to fight to the end.<sup>58</sup> Regardless of Japan's true intentions, however, during wartime it is only natural from a military perspective for a state on the verge of being invaded to prepare to fight to the end.

The historians Lawrence Freedman and Saki Dockrill argue that the use of nuclear weapons by the United States was justified because Japan would also have used atomic bombs during the war had they been available.<sup>59</sup> This is, however, merely an assumption based on another assumption, and even if Japan had the intention of using nuclear weapons, Freedman and Dockrill's argument does not address the question of whether using them for the political goal of forcing an enemy to surrender on one's own terms can be considered equivalent to using them in retaliation in response to a crisis of national survival.

It is interesting to note here a memorandum from Undersecretary of the Navy Ralph Bard to Stimson, dated June 28, which included the following sentence: "Following the three-power

---

<sup>56</sup> Naka Akira, *Mokusatsu: Potsudamu Sengen no Shinjitsu to Nippon no Unmei* (jo) [The "Mokusatsu" Statement: The Truth about the Potsdam Declaration and Japan's Fate (vol. 1)] (Tokyo: Nippon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 2000), p. 79.

<sup>57</sup> Kurihara Ken and Hatano Sumio, eds., *Shusen Kosaku no Kiroku* (ge) [Records of Maneuvering for Ending the War (vol. 2)] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1986), p. 319.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Kort, "The Historiography of Hiroshima: The Rise and Fall of Revisionism," [http://www.theamericanpresident.us/images/truman\\_bomb.pdf](http://www.theamericanpresident.us/images/truman_bomb.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> Lawrence Freedman and Saki Dockrill, "Hiroshima: A Strategy of Shock," in *From Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima: The Second World War in Asia and the Pacific, 1941-45*, ed. Saki Dockrill (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1994), p. 209.

conference [the Potsdam Conference] emissaries from this country could contact representatives from Japan somewhere on the China Coast and make representations with regard to Russia's position and at the same time give them some information regarding the proposed use of atomic power, together with whatever assurances the President might care to make with regard to the Emperor of Japan and the treatment of the Japanese nation following unconditional surrender. It seems quite possible to me that this presents the opportunity which the Japanese are looking for." While of course acknowledging that the success of such a policy was not certain, Bard added, "The only way to find out is to try it out."<sup>60</sup> Setting aside the feasibility of Bard's proposal itself, one perhaps cannot say definitively that sufficient measures were taken to avoid the atomic bombings of the two cities and the civilians living in them—an action that does not align with humanitarian principles.

The manner in which the decision to use nuclear weapons was made, was lacking in cautiousness. Or rather, it appears that there may not have been any kind of action that one could characterize as a "decision" at all.<sup>61</sup> The atomic bombing orders were issued on July 25 with the approval of Stimson and Chief of Staff of the Army George Marshall, but no presidential order was issued. Bernstein points out that Truman did not make the decision to use nuclear weapons, and that he simply opted not to overturn the already established course of action.<sup>62</sup> General Leslie R. Groves Jr., who oversaw the Manhattan Project, also described the process as Truman opting to continue with the existing plan (rather than deciding anew himself as the newly inaugurated president to actively choose to use nuclear weapons).<sup>63</sup>

There was a faction of people within the United States who, like Groves, were in fact proactive in their support for the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, it is not the case that the use of nuclear weapons and the Soviet entry into the war against Japan were coordinated as part of a joint U.S.-Soviet strategy for ending the war.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, one cannot overlook the fact that the interval placed between the first atomic bombing and the second was insufficient.

In other words, while the use of nuclear weapons was, as proponents of the Cost Minimization Theory argue, driven by the goal of minimizing the costs of war, it was also an action that was conducted without a sufficient degree of caution. The historian J. Samuel Walker describes this as a "lack of incentives not to use the weapons."<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, the United States prioritized its unconditional surrender policy over humanitarian concerns regarding the use of nuclear weapons.

#### 4. The Efficacy Standpoint (1): The Nuclear Factor Theory

Next, I will examine the Nuclear Factor Theory and Soviet Factor Theory from the standpoint of

---

<sup>60</sup> Ralph A. Bard, "Memorandum on the Use of S-1 Bomb," June 27, 1945, Harrison-Bundy Files, Record Group 77, microfilm publication M1108, folder 77, National Archives, Washington, D.C., last updated June 30, 2017, <http://www.doug-long.com/bard.htm>.

<sup>61</sup> Michael D. Gordin, *Five Days in August: How World War II Became a Nuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 40.

<sup>62</sup> Bernstein, "Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb, 1941–1945," p. 61.

<sup>63</sup> Leslie R. Groves, *Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project* (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 266.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>65</sup> Holloway, "Jockeying for Position in the Postwar World," p. 175.

<sup>66</sup> Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, p. 92.

the efficacy of the atomic bombings.<sup>67</sup>

As is well known, it is exceedingly difficult to determine whether the direct cause of Japan's surrender was the use of nuclear weapons or the Soviet entry into the war. These two events occurred in extremely rapid succession, and the subsequent acceptance of the terms of the Potsdam Declaration was the net result of a chain reaction of actions stemming from the combined psychological states of numerous groups of people. It is therefore incredibly challenging to conclusively argue which of the two events was the more significant factor. Conversely, proponents of the so-called "double shock" theory, which posits that both the atomic bombing and the Soviet entry into the war were necessary factors,<sup>68</sup> also encounter difficulties in arguing that either one alone would have been insufficient.

Although it is not my aim with this paper to determine whether the use of nuclear weapons or the Soviet entry into the war was the decisive factor in Japan's surrender, I would like to touch upon certain suggestions drawn from historical materials as well as interpretations based on them. That said, it is essential to exercise caution here as well, since even if one could argue that the use of nuclear weapons was a more important factor in causing Japan's surrender than the Soviet entry into the war from the Efficacy Standpoint (a stance that I approach with skepticism in this paper), such an assertion would be based on the wisdom of hindsight. It would also not validate the judgments made at the time of the decision to use nuclear weapons nor would it justify the Cost Minimization Theory from the Objectives Standpoint. The Cost Minimization Theory and the Nuclear Factor Theory are not the same.

As for elements in the arguments supporting the Nuclear Factor Theory, it was obvious that the destructive power of nuclear weapons far exceeded that of conventional bombing, and that additional atomic bombings would have caused extensive devastation. Frank places emphasis on how the atomic bombings raised the possibility that the U.S. military invasion of the Japanese home islands, which had been a fundamental premise for the Japanese side's argument that Japan ought to fight to the bitter end, might not even be implemented.<sup>69</sup>

Meanwhile, by the time of the atomic bombings, many Japanese cities had already been destroyed with conventional bombing. Regardless of whether or not the United States possessed nuclear weapons, there was already deep-seated anxiety in Japan about the possibility of an invasion of the Japanese home islands,<sup>70</sup> and it was this anxiety that drove Japan to seek Soviet mediation. What is more, the opposition of the Japanese military to acceptance of the terms of the Potsdam Declaration remained unchanged even after the atomic bombings. As previously noted, even if Emperor Hirohito and Togo were prepared to accept unfavorable conditions as a result

---

<sup>67</sup> For studies on the Nuclear Factor Theory, see Asada, "Genbaku Toka no Shogeki to Kofuku no Kettei [The Shock of the Atomic Bombing and the Decision to Surrender]." For studies on the Soviet Factor Theory, see the following: Hasegawa, *Anto* [Secret Feud]; Ward Wilson, "The Winning Weapon? Rethinking Nuclear Weapons in Light of Hiroshima," *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 4 (Spring 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Sumio Hatano, "The Atomic Bomb and Soviet Entry into the War: Of Equal Importance," in *The End of the Pacific War*, ed. Hasegawa, p. 112.

<sup>69</sup> Frank, *Downfall*, pp. 239, 343, 348; Richard B. Frank, "Ending the Asia-Pacific War: New Dimensions," in *The Termination of Wars in Historical Perspective (International Forum on War History: Report)*, ed. National Institute for Defense Studies, Ministry of Defense (NIDS) (Tokyo: NIDS, 2016), p. 54.

<sup>70</sup> Hasunuma Shigeru, "Kaiso 4 (1950-nen 3-gatsu 31-nichi) [Memoirs 4 (March 31, 1950)]," in *Shogen Kiroku Taiheiyo Senso: Shusen e no Ketsudan* [Pacific War Testimony Records: The Decision to the End the War], ed. Sankei Shimbun Shuppan Kyoku (Tokyo: Sankei Shimbun Shuppan Kyoku, 1975), p. 254.

of the atomic bombings, they may still have been acting under the assumption that the Soviet mediation strategy would continue to be pursued.

One piece of evidence used by proponents of the Nuclear Factor Theory is the testimony of Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Kido.<sup>71</sup> In his testimony, Kido stated that “just as the weight of the peace faction had increased to the point where it had reached a balance with the weight of the faction calling for continued fighting, the atomic bombings significantly weakened the position of the latter, and the peace faction gained the upper hand. And then with the Soviet entry into the war against Japan, I think the position of the faction seeking to continue fighting weakened further, making the peace faction stronger still. Therefore, I believe that the war could have been ended even just with the atomic bombs alone, but the Soviet entry into the war made the process even easier.”<sup>72</sup> This statement gives the impression that Kido was throwing up a smokescreen.

Kido had been an advocate of the strategy of seeking Soviet mediation, so it would have been difficult for him to say that the entry of the Soviets into the war was the decisive factor in Japan’s surrender, as it would be tantamount to him acknowledging the failure of that strategy.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, Kido’s emphasis on the atomic bombings as a decisive factor may not have been solely for self-justification. The interview of Kido was conducted on April 17, 1950, when Japan was still under occupation and the position of the emperor had not yet been fully settled, with discussions about his abdication still ongoing. Refraining from attributing Japan’s surrender to the Soviet entry into the war may also have been partly motivated by a desire to protect the emperor, who had been involved in the efforts to arrange for mediation by the Soviets.

Kido also stated after the war that, “if the military leadership could say that the loss of the war was due to science, rather than because they were lacking in strength of spirit or tactical capabilities, it would help save face to some extent when surrendering.” This implies that Japan was able to accept defeat because it was science, or in other words atomic bombing, that had allowed the military to preserve its honor.<sup>74</sup> Yet at the August 10 Imperial Conference where the decision to accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration was made, Emperor Hirohito did not state anything to the effect that the military had done well, or that he was convinced that they would surely have achieved results in the battle for the home islands but that there was nothing that could be done about the disparity in scientific capabilities that the atomic bomb represents, and that there was therefore no option but to surrender. In fact, the opposite is true. At this final step of the war, the emperor instead criticized the military.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Asada, “Genbaku Toka no Shogeki to Kofuku no Kettei [The Shock of the Atomic Bombing and the Decision to Surrender],” pp. 207–208.

<sup>72</sup> Kido Koichi, “Shusenji no Kaiso Jakkan [Some Reflections at the Time of the War’s End],” in *GHQ Rekishika Chinjutsuroku: Shusenshi Shiryo* (jo) [GHQ Historical Section Testimonies: Historical Documents from the End of the War (vol. 1)], ed. Sato Motoei and Kurosawa Fumitaka (Tokyo: Hara Shobo, 2002), p. 44.

<sup>73</sup> Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, “The Atomic Bombs and the Soviet Invasion: Which Was More Important in Japan’s Decision to Surrender?” in *The End of the Pacific War*, ed. Hasegawa, p. 137.

<sup>74</sup> “Danwa [Conversation]” (April 17, 1950), in *Kido Koichi Nikki: Tokyo Saibanki* [Kido Koichi’s Diary: The Tokyo Trials Period], ed. Kido Nikki Kenkyukai [Kido Diary Research Association] (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai [University of Tokyo Press], 1980), p. 443.

<sup>75</sup> “Hoshina Zenshiro Shuki [Hoshina Zenshiro Notes],” in *Shusen Shiroku* (ge) [Historical Record of the End of the War (vol. 2)], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, p. 599.



## 5. The Efficacy Standpoint (2): The Soviet Factor Theory

Next, as with the Nuclear Factor Theory, the Soviet Factor Theory is supported by the immediate shock of the events concerned, and the fact that, as the hours ticked away, Japan's position grew increasingly perilous. The Soviet entry into the war effectively nullified any remaining possibility of Japan defending against an invasion of its home islands, a possibility that had already been in doubt. The political scientist Paul Kecskemeti argues that even with the use of nuclear weapons, Japan would have clung to the hope of Soviet mediation had the Soviets not entered the war against them.<sup>76</sup> This argument is the most convincing when viewed in light of the process leading to Japan's acceptance of the terms of the Potsdam Declaration. While Japan's military leadership remained committed to continuing to wage war even after the entry of the Soviets against Japan, it is worth noting that immediately after the Soviet entry into the war they shifted (during the Supreme War Council meeting on August 9) from outright rejection of the Potsdam Declaration to arguing about surrender conditions with acceptance of the terms of the Potsdam Declaration in mind. It is easy to imagine the sense of loss Japanese leaders must have felt after learning of the Soviet entry into the war, and the psychological difficulty in recovering from such a blow.

One common argument in support of the Nuclear Factor Theory is based on a passage in the Imperial Rescript Ending the War: "Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is indeed incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives." However, the second draft of the Cabinet's proposal on August 14 contained the following sentence, which was removed from the final draft: "We ordered the imperial government to seek mediation from a third country, but this unfortunately did not come to fruition, and this is the reason why We ultimately accepted the provisions of the Joint Declaration of the Powers."<sup>77</sup> This perhaps indicates that caution is needed when basing arguments for the Nuclear Factor Theory on the content of the Imperial Rescript.

Despite this, the above points do not allow one to definitively conclude that the Soviet entry into the war was necessary to cause Japan to accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration. It was the Soviet refusal to mediate that was critical. Unlike the use of nuclear weapons by the United States, the Soviet entry into the war against Japan was not an action taken for the purpose of bringing the conflict to an early resolution. It is clear that the Soviet entry into the war was an act of aggression against Japan, and even if one accepts the Soviet Factor Theory, it cannot possibly be used to justify the Soviet action.

## Conclusion

Within the discourse concerning the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States, the Atomic Diplomacy Theory does not necessarily need to be paired with the Soviet Factor Theory, nor the Cost Minimization Theory with the Nuclear Factor Theory. In fact, based on research in recent years and newly declassified documents, it is possible to examine the Cost Minimization Theory from the Objectives Standpoint, and the Soviet Factor Theory from the Efficacy Standpoint.

While the Cost Minimization Theory tends to be used to justify the atomic bombings, in

---

<sup>76</sup> Kecskemeti, *Strategic Surrender*, pp. 203–204.

<sup>77</sup> Chaen Yoshio, *Misshitsu no Shusen Shochoku* [The Imperial Rescript Ending the War behind Closed Doors] (Tokyo: Yushodo Shuppan, 1989), p. 273.

this paper I have highlighted that, if it had been conveyed to the Japanese side that there was zero possibility of Soviet mediation, or if Stalin's signature had been on the Potsdam Declaration, or if the Potsdam Declaration had been issued as an official document, the outcome may have been different. With regard to these points, it must be said that the process leading to the use of nuclear weapons by the United States was lacking in the cautiousness warranted by the magnitude of the tragedy it would cause.

The atomic bombing of Japan by the United States during the closing stages of the Pacific War has cast a long shadow over postwar Japan-U.S. relations. On May 27, 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to visit Hiroshima, marking a pivotal moment in the addressing of the issue. Additionally, during the G7 Summit held in Hiroshima from May 19 to 21, 2023, leaders of countries that had been Allied powers and Axis powers fighting on opposite sides of World War II came together 78 years after the end of the war to bow their heads at the Cenotaph for the Victims of the Atomic Bomb. It is necessary to move beyond emotional debates and conduct objective analysis of the use of nuclear weapons as an example of failed war termination policy.

(National Institute for Defense Studies)