

# Hiroshima Reconsidered

By WILLIAM L. NEUMANN\*

The generation born since World War II and now surging through college classrooms views with less awe than its elders that event which Harry Truman proclaimed on August 6, 1945, as "the greatest thing in history". Students glimpse the possibility that nuclear weapons may determine their own life span, but the bombs tend to be accepted, like television and transistor radios, as normal facts of life, a part of the environment of modern society.

Acceptance of the threat of nuclear warfare has not stilled this generation's curiosity about the decision to try to end the Pacific war with a mass cremation of Japanese. Many students, after reviewing the available facts, are unable to comprehend or accept the official justifications for the American decision. This skepticism will now be intensified by two recent volumes which reexamine the thinking that surrounded the first use of atomic weapons.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Len Giovannitti and Fred Freed, The Decision to Drop the Bomb (New York: Coward-McCann, 1965). 348 pp. \$6.00.  
Gar Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965). 317 pp. \$7.50.

Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam is the work of Gar Alperovitz, who took an undergraduate degree in history at the University of Wisconsin, a master's degree in economics at Berkeley and a doctorate in political economy at Cambridge. Writing with a very strong thesis which at times is stretched too far, Alperovitz has produced a scholarly work from the great mass of printed materials as well as using the few manuscript collections now available. Len Giovannitti and Fred Freed are television writers, drawn into producing The Decision to Drop the Bomb as a result of their research on two N.B.C. documentaries. Their bibliography lists most of the standard secondary works along with over fifty interviews of American and Japanese individuals who had some role in the bomb decision or the surrender. Although their volume is in great part made up of quotes, their sources are not clearly identified either by footnotes or in the text. Many of those interviewed had already written books or articles on the subject and the interviewing technique seems to have been too conventional, failing to raise the kind of searching questions that might have elicited new information or fresh interpretations. Within these limitations, however, The Decision to Drop the Bomb is a good introduction to the current state of knowledge on this subject. While Alperovitz's volume attempts to revise the conventional view, Giovannitti and Freed in the end accept the prevailing interpretation but their book provides materials for a revision.

The official view of the purpose of the elimination of two Japanese cities is that upheld by Harry Truman in his memoirs: that the bomb was dropped to save the lives of American boys who were expected to die in an invasion. As the years have passed and Japanese have acquired status as a "friendly people", the intention has been broadened to include the saving of Japanese lives as well. Truman emphasized this point a few years ago when he was visited by a Japanese delegation of survivors. Winston Churchill in his Triumph and Tragedy volume stated the official intention far more eloquently, "To avert a vast, indefinite butchery, to bring the war to an end, to give peace to the world, to lay healing hands upon its tortured peoples by a manifestation of overwhelming power at the cost of a few explosions." Some of the scientists involved in producing the bomb have affirmed the same viewpoint, notably Karl Compton and James B. Conant, both members of the Interim Committee that weighed the bomb's use. Robert Oppenheimer also seems to fall in this group with his statement to Giovannitti and Freed that

"the decision was implicit in the project", claiming that the makers of the bomb always assumed that it would be used.

Estimates as to the number of lives expected to be lost in the Japanese invasion vary. Churchill claimed that the conquest of Nippon "might well require" the loss of a million Americans and half that number of British. Truman in his memoirs reported that General Marshall had told him that it might cost a half a million lives to force Japan's surrender on its own soil. If estimates were made of expected Japanese deaths they have not as yet been published. American military plans contemplated the invasion of the most southern of the major islands, Kyushu, in November of 1945, with a possible American casualty list of thirty to forty thousand. The central plain of Tokyo was to be invaded in 1946 and mopping up operations in Japan completed in 1947.

Among supporters of the decision to drop the bomb there is also a secondary argument for the necessity of this action. In view of the investment of two billion dollars of the taxpayers' money in the atomic project, it is claimed that the Roosevelt and Truman administration had to act to prove the value of this expenditure. If the bombs were not used and their existence concealed, Congress would have eventually uncovered the decision and the critics of the administration - presumably the Republicans - would have had a powerful weapon with which to berate their opponents. In an age when many more billions are gambled on a very questionable race to the moon and when each misfire costs the taxpayer millions such sensitivity to wartime waste on the part of the voter seems less credible, but both James Byrnes and General Leslie Groves clearly had this consideration in mind.

The case of the doubters and critics rests heavily on the information available to Washington that Japan was close to surrender before Hiroshima. Despite the valiant fighting on Okinawa the will to continue the war was reported to be fading rapidly by a number of intelligence sources. The Japanese Navy had ceased operations and the Air Force was severely decimated, with oil shortages grounding most of the surviving planes. Peace feelers had been made to Moscow in the spring of 1945 and their existence communicated to Washington. As the U. S. Strategic Bombing Survey concluded after their postwar study of Japanese morale: "From the standpoint of the politics of surrender -

and by August 1945 politics was the key - the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not essential." Air Force General Curtis LeMay, whose bombers had killed more Japanese in their fire raid on Tokyo than did the first atomic bomb, was certain that he would run out of targets and out of a war by September of 1945.

There can be little doubt that there was some realization of Japan's imminent collapse on the highest levels of government by the summer of 1945. "Japan is doomed and the Japanese know it," Harry Hopkins informed the White House from Moscow in late May. Even General Eisenhower, busy with occupation problems in Europe, claims that he knew that Japan was defeated and that dropping the bomb was unnecessary. In Mandate for Change he reports the visit of Secretary of War Stimson to Europe, informing the General of the plan for bombing Japan. Stimson is remembered as being "deeply perturbed" and "almost angrily refuting" the reasons Eisenhower offered for his belief that the bomb was not needed to save American lives and would only shock world opinion. Admiral William Leahy, Chief of Staff to the President, and one who doubted that the bomb would even explode, also claimed that Japan was already defeated because of the effective sea blockade and conventional bombing.

This evidence is basic to the belief that there was another reason, or at least an additional reason, for using the bomb on Japan. One of the earliest to set forth another thesis - if not the first to do so - was P.M.S. Blackett, the British physicist and Nobel prize winner. Writing in 1948, Blackett claimed that the nuclear bombing was not so much the last act of the Second World War as it was the first major operation of the Cold War against the Soviet Union. This view, strongly upheld by Alperovitz, has two phases: one, that the use of the bomb was intended to end the Pacific War before the Russians moved into China and by a declaration of war acquired a claim to sharing the occupation of Japan. The second phase of the argument is that the bomb was also intended as a demonstration of American power that would make the Russians more amenable to accepting American policies in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

Keeping the Russians from implementing their Yalta pledge to enter the war against Japan was no doubt a consideration that weighed heavily in Washington. Churchill also took note of it, and in discussing the bomb de-

cision in Triumph and Tragedy he says: "Moreover, we should not need the Russians. . . We had no need to ask favours of them." Alperovitz offers a great deal of evidence of the growth of influence of the "hard-line" proponents, both political and military men, who found in President Truman a receptive mind. Each difficulty with Russia encountered by American policy in Europe convinced these men of the importance of keeping Stalin from playing any role in Asia and particularly in the occupation of Japan.

There is more difficulty in assessing the importance of the bomb's use as a modern version of the old sword-rattling technique in an effort to scare the Kremlin. Jonathan Daniels, son of Josephus, Wilson's Secretary of the Navy and a White House aide, has recorded what is the most unambiguous record of Truman's thinking. According to Daniels, when Truman discussed the bomb he said: "If it explodes, as I think it will, I'll certainly have a hammer on those boys." Leo Szilard, the physicist, reports a similar expression of hope on the part of Byrnes, who said that the major purpose of the bomb was to "make Russia more manageable in Europe."

The initiative in launching the Cold War consequently seems no longer so one-sidedly attributable to the Kremlin. Already, on April 20, 1945, Averill Harriman told Truman that the United States was faced with a "barbarian invasion of Europe". The historian might wonder what the indictment of the Russians would have been if they had stopped their warfare against the Germans on the 1939 Polish-German frontiers and left the bloody task of taking Berlin to the British and Americans. Harriman and other hard-line advisers of Truman seem to ground the greatest source of their hostility in the Russian insistence upon installing their own hand-picked government in Poland. The White House seems to have had no important adviser whose historical knowledge recalled the attempt of the victors in 1919 to install a cordon sanitaire in Eastern Europe. A little history and a little insight might have suggested that the Russians would view any British and American interference in Eastern Europe as a new effort to rebuild the structure that had collapsed at least by 1938. A little understanding of the behavior of great powers would also have suggested that the Russians, having bled to the extent of over seven million combat dead, would be determined to install their own cordon sanitaire in those countries that had fallen so quickly to Nazi Germany.

Reading Alperovitz raises an even more basic question about the nature of changes in American policy. For some important members of the Truman administration in 1945 Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe were significant enough areas for American national interests to risk launching a third world war and disrupting the United Nations at its very inception. As Truman said, if the Russians did not play ball and did not wish to join us in the United Nations - on American terms, of course - "they could go to hell". Yet, only a few years before, in 1938 and 1939, when there had been some opportunity to fight to maintain a skeleton of the 1919 settlement, none of these voices were raised to propose American intervention. Truman had been typical of a kind of unintellectual middlewestern isolationist who, as late as June of 1941, had greeted with glee a Russo-German conflict as weakening both of these powers.

What radical change in the role of Poland or in the American mind made a war over Poland unthinkable for American leaders in 1939 but easily contemplated in 1945? Was it the vaguely forming concept of a Pax Americana that made all areas of the world open to the influence of the rival great power of almost equal vital importance to American eyes? John Lukacs, in his brief study of the origins of the Cold War, makes a good case for the view that postwar Soviet Russian national interests have greater congruity with those of Tsarist Russia than have the 1945 and post-1945 assessments of American national interests with those of 1935. The great revolution in world affairs might well be considered the new role chosen by the United States. In this change, the creation and use of the atomic bomb, as these two recent volumes suggest, was a central factor. An important area of revisionism is being opened up by this new thesis or set of theses. Like most revisionism in international affairs, the new thesis must fight the "good nation vs. bad nation" oversimplifications which nationalism tries to impose upon scholarship and which often makes unpopular the struggle for truth and objectivity.