

The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered

Barton J. Bernstein

THE QUESTIONS AMERICA SHOULD ASK

FIFTY YEARS AGO, during a three-day period in August 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, killing more than 115,000 people and possibly as many as 250,000, and injuring at least another 100,000. In the aftermath of the war, the bombings raised both ethical and historical questions about why and how they were used. Would they have been used on Germany? Why were cities targeted so that so many civilians would be killed? Were there likely alternative ways to end the war speedily and avoid the Allies' scheduled November 1, 1945, invasion of Kyushu?

Such questions often fail to recognize that, before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the use of the A-bomb did not raise profound moral issues for policymakers. The weapon was conceived in a race with Germany, and it undoubtedly would have been used against Germany had the bomb been ready much sooner. During the war, the target shifted to Japan. And during World War II's brutal course, civilians in cities had already become targets. The grim Axis bombing record is well known. Masses of noncombatants were also intentionally killed in the later stages of the American air war against Germany; that tactic was developed further in 1945 with the firebombing of Japanese cities.

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Such mass bombing constituted a transformation of morality, repudiating President Franklin D. Roosevelt's prewar pleas that the warring nations avoid bombing cities to spare civilian lives. Thus, by 1945, American leaders were not seeking to avoid the use of the A-bomb on Japan. But the evidence from current archival research shows that by pursuing alternative tactics instead, they probably could still have obviated the dreaded invasion and ended the war by November.

SHIFTING FROM GERMANY TO JAPAN

IN 1941, urged by émigré and American scientists, President Roosevelt initiated the atomic bomb project—soon code-named the Manhattan Project—amid what was believed to be a desperate race with Hitler's Germany for the bomb. At the beginning, Roosevelt and his chief aides assumed that the A-bomb was a legitimate weapon that would be used first against Nazi Germany. They also decided that the bomb project should be kept secret from the Soviet Union, even after the Soviets became a wartime ally, because the bomb might well give the United States future leverage against the Soviets.

By mid-1944, the landscape of the war had changed. Roosevelt and his top advisers knew that the likely target would now be Japan, for the war with Germany would undoubtedly end well before the A-bomb was expected to be ready, around the spring of 1945. In a secret September 1944 memorandum at Hyde Park, Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ratified the shift from Germany to Japan. Their phrasing suggested that, for the moment anyway, they might have had some slight doubts about actually using the bomb, for they agreed that "it might *perhaps*, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese" (my emphasis).

Four days later, mulling over matters aloud with a visiting British diplomat and chief U.S. science adviser Vannevar Bush, Roosevelt briefly wondered whether the A-bomb should be dropped on Japan or whether it should be demonstrated in America, presumably with Japanese observers, and then used as a threat. His speculative notion seemed so unimportant and so contrary to the project's long-standing operating assumptions that Bush actually forgot about it when he pre-



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When civilians became targets

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