

The decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

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Today, Barack Obama will be visiting Hiroshima, the first sitting US president to do so since the horrific events of August 1945. The White House has made clear that Obama “will not revisit the decision to use the atomic bomb,” nor will any apology be forthcoming. Rather, as the WSWS noted in a Perspective published earlier this month, Obama will go to Hiroshima not to apologize for past crimes, but to prepare new ones.”

This essay was written during the Bush administration. The passage of a decade and the transition from Bush to Obama have not lessened the warnings that it makes. On the contrary, global geopolitical tensions—fueled above all by the actions of American imperialism—have vastly intensified the danger of a new world war, waged with nuclear weapons.

In the early morning hours of August 6, 1945, an American B-29 warplane, named the *Enola Gay*, rolled down the runway of an American airbase on the Pacific island of Tinian. It flew for almost six hours, encountering no resistance from the ground.

At 8:15 a.m. local time, the plane dropped its payload over the clear skies of Hiroshima, a Japanese city with an estimated population of 255,000. The atomic bomb that the plane was carrying, “Little Boy,” detonated some 600 meters above the city center, killing 80,000 people—30 percent of the population—immediately or within hours of the explosion.

Three days later, on August 9, a similar plane carrying a more powerful weapon left Tinian but had more difficulty reaching its intended destination. After encountering fire from the ground, and finding its target city Kokura covered in clouds, it flew on to its second target, Nagasaki, a heavily industrialized city of about 270,000. Due to the specific topological features of Nagasaki, and to the fact that the bomb missed the city center, the effects were slightly less devastating. An estimated 40,000 people were killed outright.

Over the next several months, tens of thousands more died from their injuries, including radiation sickness caused by the nuclear devices. While exact figures involving such magnitudes are inherently difficult to come by, estimates of the total number of men, women and children killed within four months of the two blasts range from 200,000 to 350,000. Never before had such devastation been wrought so quickly.

The bombs, combined with a Soviet invasion of Japanese-controlled Manchuria on August 8, led quickly to the end of the war in the Pacific. On September 2, the government of Japan signed a treaty with the allied powers that essentially ceded complete control of the country to the American military.

Japan’s surrender, coming four months after the surrender of Germany, brought the Second World War to an end. At the same time, it marked a new stage in the increasingly antagonistic relationship between the United

States and the Soviet Union, which had been military allies in the war. Within four years, the Soviet Union acquired its own nuclear weapon, initiating a nuclear arms race that continued for four decades.

The official rationale given by the US government for its use of nuclear weapons in the war has always been that it was necessary to save American lives by avoiding an invasion of Japan. After the war, government officials, facing criticism for their decision to use the bomb, suggested that between 500,000 and 1 million Americans, and several million Japanese, were saved by dropping the bombs that completely destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This rationale has always been highly suspect, and in subsequent years much evidence emerged demonstrating that not only were the estimated casualty figures from an invasion highly exaggerated, but that the war could have been quickly ended even without an invasion.

While the reasons for the use of the bombs are complex, they center around two interrelated geopolitical aims of the American ruling elite at the end of the war: (1) the desire to limit the influence of the Soviet Union in East Asia by bringing the war to an end before the Soviet forces advanced far into China toward Japan, and (2) the wish to have a physical demonstration of the unrivaled power of the American military, and its willingness to use this power to advance its interests.

A new type of bomb

The Potsdam declaration, issued by the Allied powers on July 26, 1945, pledged the “prompt and utter destruction” of Japan if it did not agree to unconditional surrender. For the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, this is certainly what the atomic bombs brought.

By the time of the bombing of Hiroshima, many of Japan’s large cities had been attacked severely by American air power. After the US military had gained control of Japanese airspace, the Air Force began to systematically bomb metropolitan areas, including the devastating firebombing of Tokyo earlier in the year, which killed an estimated 87,000 people. The fact that Hiroshima had so far not been targeted was considered something of an anomaly by its residents, since, in addition to civilian production facilities, the city housed an important military headquarters.

Nevertheless, the bomb caught the people of Hiroshima unprepared. A weather-scouting plane had triggered sirens earlier in the morning, but an all-clear signal had been given once it departed. The *Enola Gay* and two planes that were accompanying it were assumed to be more scouting planes, and therefore the alarms were not sounded when they flew over the city.

The blast of the uranium bomb dropped on Hiroshima had the explosive equivalent of about 13,000 tons of TNT. The nuclear reaction in the bomb generated temperatures of several million degrees Centigrade. At the hypocenter, the point on the ground 600 meters below the explosion, temperatures reached 3,000 to 4,000 degrees Centigrade, two times the melting point of iron. The intense flash of heat and light, which

incinerated everything within a kilometer-and-a-half of the hypocenter, was followed by an enormous shock wave that destroyed most buildings within two kilometers.

The Hiroshima bomb was targeted at the Aioi Bridge, which it missed by about 250 meters. According to one account, the bomb exploded instead directly above a hospital headed by a Dr. Shima: "The Shima hospital and all its patients were vaporized.... Eighty-eight percent of the people within a radius of 1,500 feet died instantly or later on that day. Most others within the circle perished in the following weeks or months." [1]

Those close to the hypocenter were instantly incinerated without leaving behind a trace, except for perhaps a shadow on a wall or street where their bodies had partially protected the surface from the initial flash of heat. One author notes that those closest to the blast "passed from being to nothingness faster than any human physiology can register." [2]

Those slightly farther from the center of the explosion did not die immediately, but suffered from severe third-degree burns all over their bodies, in particular to any areas that were exposed directly to the heat. They suffered a period of intense pain before dying of their injuries. Those who witnessed the explosion and survived invariably describe these victims in the most horrific terms.

A doctor who had been on the outskirts of the city when the explosion occurred wrote about what he saw as he rushed in to help the victims. He explained how, as he approached the city center, a "strange figure came up to me little by little, unsteady on its feet. It surely seemed like the form of a man but it was completely naked, bloody and covered with mud. The body was completely swollen. Rags hung from its bare breast and waist. The hands were held before the breasts with palms turned down. Water dripped from the rags. Indeed, what I took to be rags were in fact pieces of human skin and the water drops were human blood.... I looked at the road before me. Denuded, burnt and bloody, numberless survivors stood in my path. They were massed together, some crawling on their knees or on all fours, some stood with difficulty or leaned on another's shoulder." [3]

The description of disfigured people with "skin hanging down like rags" is common among those who survived to tell what they saw. Many saw people roaming the streets, in intense pain, often blind from the burns or deaf from the explosion, with their arms stretched out in front of them, "with forearms and hands dangling ... to prevent the painful friction of raw surfaces rubbing together," [4] some "staggering like sleepwalkers." [5]

Perhaps thousands died in this way. A doctor named Tabuchi described how, "all through the night," hundreds of injured people "went past our house, but this morning [August 7] they had stopped. I found them lying on both sides of the road so thick that it was impossible to pass without stepping on them." [6] One survivor wrote how he witnessed "Hundreds of those still alive ... wandering around vacantly. Some were half-dead, writhing in their misery.... They were no more than living corpses." [7]

Many of those who did not die immediately sought to find their way to the rivers or reservoirs to seek relief from the burning pain. A survivor describes how he "saw that the long bank of the river at Choju-En was filled with a large number of burned human beings. They occupied the bank as far as the eye could see. The greatest number lay in the water rolling slowly at the mercy of the waves," having drowned or died at the bank's edge. [8] Another doctor, Hanoka, described how he "saw fire reservoirs filled to the brim with dead people who looked as though they had been boiled alive." [9]

Much of the city within several kilometers of the blast's center was completely destroyed. Buildings that were not flattened by the explosion itself were consumed in the ensuing fire that engulfed the largely wooden homes. Many who were trapped when their homes collapsed over them died in this fire.

Dr. Hachiya writes, "Hiroshima was no longer a city, but a burnt-over prairie. To the east and to the west everything was flattened. The distant mountains seemed nearer than I could ever remember. The hills of Ushita and the woods of Nigitsu loomed out of the haze and smoke like the nose and eyes of a face. How small Hiroshima was with its houses gone." [10]

Within a week of the explosions in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, most of those who had been severely injured had either died or were beginning to recover. However, it was at this point that thousands of patients unexpectedly began to experience "sudden attacks of high fever which had risen above forty degrees Celsius.... And then they began to bleed from their mucous membranes and soon spat up quantities of blood.... It was also at this time that an uncanny form of depilation, or hair loss, began among the survivors. When patients raised their hands to their heads while struggling with pain, their hair would fall out with a mere touch of the fingers." [11]

This was radiation disease caused by the nuclear reaction, which emitted enormous quantities of gamma rays. At the time, however, doctors in the city had not yet learned about the peculiar nature of the bomb dropped over the city, and speculated that the population was suffering from a wave of dysentery, or perhaps chemical poisoning from something released by the bomb.

A British medical report explained that the radiation released from the explosion did not destroy the cells in the bloodstream, but attacked "the primitive cells in the bone marrow, from which most of the different types of cells in the blood are formed. Therefore serious effects begin to appear only as the fully-formed cells already in the blood die off gradually and are not replaced as they would normally by new cells formed in the bone marrow.... As red cell formation ceased, the patient began to suffer from progressive anemia. As platelet formation ceased, the thin blood seeped in small and large hemorrhages into the skin and the retina of the eye, and sometimes into the intestines and the kidneys. The fall in the number of white cells ... in severe cases lowered resistance, so that the patient inevitably fell prey to some infection, usually spreading from the mouth and accompanied by gangrene of the lips, the tongue, and sometimes the throat.... Deaths probably began in about a week after the explosion, reached a peak in about three weeks and had for the most part ceased after six to eight weeks." [12]

The radiation disease affected those nearest the blast most severely. However, it left profound psychological scars on many of those who survived, constantly tormented by the thought that, though healthy today, they too could succumb tomorrow.

The above description is derived primarily from testimony of survivors of the Hiroshima bomb. However, the effects in Nagasaki were similar. The Nagasaki bomb was dropped before the full devastation of the Hiroshima bomb had become widely known. The day of the bombing was pushed up to August 9 from August 11, because of poor weather forecasts for the latter date.

Nagasaki had long been a principal port and one of the most beautiful cities on the Japanese island of Kyushu. Its main industry was shipbuilding, which made it a target for the second bomb. The bomb exploded over the suburb of Urakami, home to what was then the largest cathedral in East Asia.

While there were many atrocities committed during the Second World War, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were undoubtedly two of the greatest single acts of wanton destruction, in which the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, mainly civilians, were wiped out. They are events that should not be allowed to slip from the memory of working people around the world—a testament to the ruthlessness and destructive capacity of American militarism.

The destruction wreaked upon the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has long been justified by the American government on the

grounds that it was necessary “to save American lives.” This rationale has not ceased to be the officially sanctioned historical truth even though it has been thoroughly debunked by evidence that has come out over the past sixty years.

To cite one example, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote on August 5, 2005 that the bombs averted an invasion of the Japanese mainland, “for which the Truman Administration anticipated casualties of between 200,000 and one million.” Moreover, “a mainland invasion could have resulted in millions of Japanese deaths.” According to this calculus, the hundreds of thousands of Japanese citizens, mainly civilians, who suffered an inexpressible agony and death from the atom bomb were sacrificed in the interest of preserving as many lives as possible.

Even if one were to accept the premises of this argument, it would not mitigate the fundamental criminality—legal and moral—involved in the annihilation of these urban centers. However, the premises are entirely mythical. Not only have the estimated casualty figures been exaggerated [13], but the main reasons for the US government’s decision to drop the bombs had nothing to do with avoiding an American invasion of Japan.

As with any great historical question, there were a number of different factors that went into the decision to drop the bomb, and it will be impossible to deal with all of them here. We will confine ourselves to touching on some of the basic issues and documents.

It is first of all necessary to note that the dropping of the atomic bombs on largely defenseless cities—which, while they held military headquarters or military-related industries, were predominantly civilian in character—had a certain continuity with the manner in which the United States was carrying out the war in the Pacific.

Once it had gained control of Japanese airspace, the American military increasingly turned to what can only be described as terrorist methods—indiscriminate attacks on civilian populations for the purpose of spreading fear and panic. Before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the most devastating example of these methods was the firebombing of Tokyo on March 9, 1945, which killed some 87,000 people. [14] This followed by less than a month the infamous firebombing of the German city of Dresden, on February 13-14, 1945.

Despite its humanitarian pretenses, the American military was demonstrating in these actions that it was capable of acting just as brutally as Germany or Japan in the conduct of war. There was an interesting exchange, during a discussion between President Harry Truman and Secretary of War Henry Stimson on June 6, 1945 that gives a sense of the manner in which the American government considered the question of the mass annihilation of Japanese civilians.

Stimson records in a memorandum that he raised certain pragmatic concerns with the area bombing of Japanese cities being carried out by the US Air Force: “I told [Truman] I was anxious about this feature of the war for two reasons: first, because I did not want to have the United States get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities; and second, I was a little fearful that before we could get ready the Air Force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon [the atom bomb] would not have a fair background to show its strength. He laughed and said he understood.” [15] Stimson was concerned that the wanton destruction of Japanese cities would disrupt plans for the use of the atom bomb because there would be no “fair background,” that is, a suitably populated and intact urban center. The conversation also demonstrates that at this point the United States completely dominated Japan militarily, able to destroy its cities virtually at will.

The use of the bomb as a terrorist weapon—that is, as a means of instilling mass terror among the Japanese population—was underscored in a meeting of the Interim Committee on May 31, 1945. The Interim Committee consisted of those directly involved in the Manhattan Project, such as Robert Oppenheimer and other scientists, as well as Truman administration officials, including Secretary of State James Byrnes and

Secretary of War Stimson. It was set up to discuss the use of the atomic bomb, propose targets and consider related issues. According to a transcript of that meeting, “After much discussion concerning various types of targets and the effects to be produced, the Secretary [of War Stimson] expressed the conclusion, on which there was general agreement, that we could not give the Japanese any warning; that we could not concentrate on a civilian area; but that we should seek to make a profound *psychological impression* on as many of the inhabitants as possible. At the suggestion of Dr. [James] Conant, the Secretary agreed that the most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and *closely surrounded by workers’ houses.*” (emphasis added) [16]

Despite the reference to not concentrating on a civilian area, the committee explicitly rejected the use of the bomb first on a purely military or uninhabited region, as some of the scientists who had worked with the panel recommended. [17]

Many of the scientists who worked or supported the Manhattan Project did so because of their intense hatred of Hitler and the Nazi regime. The project was originally justified on the grounds that if Hitler were to acquire the bomb first the consequences would be absolutely devastating. But by the time the United States had perfected the technology, Germany had been defeated. Nevertheless, the Truman administration not only decided to use the bomb, but did so with evident glee. Truman famously declared that he did not lose a night’s sleep over the decision. According to one account, when he heard the news about Hiroshima while crossing the Atlantic, he declared, “This is the greatest thing in history,” and then “raced about the ship to spread the news, insisting that he had never made a happier announcement. ‘We have won the gamble,’ he told the assembled and cheering crew.” [18]

Commenting on this phenomenon, the historian Gabriel Jackson remarked, “In the specific circumstances of August 1945, the use of the atom bomb showed that a psychologically very normal and democratically elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the different types of government—blurred the difference between fascism and democracy.” [19]

The atomic bomb and the drive for American hegemony

Prior to World War II, it would have been taken for granted that any civilized society could use a weapon such as the atomic bomb only under the most desperate conditions. The idea that such a weapon could be used against a civilian population would have been considered incomprehensible unless done by a society thoroughly debased and morally corrupted. And yet the United States has the singular distinction of being the only country ever to use an atomic bomb. Moreover, it used it not out of military necessity, but for political and strategic reasons, above all, as a tool in its conflict with the Soviet Union. To understand the broader interests involved, it is necessary to place the events of August 6 and August 9, 1945 in their historical context.

By early 1945, the war in Europe, begun in 1939, was coming to an end, though Germany’s final surrender did not take place until May. The turning point of the war had been the German defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad in February 1943, followed by the American-British invasion of Europe in the spring of 1944.

While the Soviet Union was allied with the United States and Britain, there were enormous divisions within the Allied camp. In spite of the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR, the Soviet bureaucracy still based itself on the property relations established in the October revolution of 1917. And in spite of Stalin’s best efforts to accommodate the imperialist powers, neither the British nor the American ruling elite ever reconciled themselves to the existence of these property relations.

But at the time, the United States and Britain required the help of the Soviet Union in the war against both Germany and Japan. The leading role of the Red Army in defeating Germany meant that the other powers were forced to grant it concessions, particularly in Eastern Europe. At the conference at Yalta in February 1945, the “Big Three” essentially agreed to the division of Europe between them, including the joint control of Germany. Moreover, the administration of US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt felt that it was critical to gain Soviet participation in the war against Japan in order to bring it to a quick conclusion. Since 1941, the Soviet Union and Japan had maintained what has been called a “strange neutrality”: while the Soviet Union was at war with Japan’s ally Germany and Japan was at war with the Soviet Union’s ally the United States, the two countries had agreed to a neutrality pact in 1941, which stipulated that they not engage in war with each other.

At Yalta, in return for an agreement that the Soviet Union would join the war against Japan “in two or three months” after Germany’s surrender, Roosevelt and Churchill accepted several territorial and commercial concessions, including Soviet control of much of Mongolia and several islands and ports near Japan that were considered crucial to Soviet interests.

By the spring of 1945, the Truman administration—Roosevelt died on April 12—was looking to the possession of the atomic bomb as a way to alter the equation and shift the balance of forces toward the US. In his diary of May 14, 1945, Secretary of War Stimson reported a conversation with General George Marshall, the President’s chief of staff, in which Stimson warned against getting in a confrontation with the Soviet Union before possession of the atom bomb was certain. Stimson writes that he told Marshall “that my own opinion was that the time now and the method now to deal with Russia was to keep our mouths shut and let our actions speak for words...It is a case where we have got to regain the lead and perhaps do it in a pretty rough and realistic way. They have rather taken it away from us because we have talked too much and have been too lavish with our beneficences to them. I told him this was a place where we really held all the cards. I called it a royal straight flush and we mustn’t be a fool about the way we play it. They can’t get along without our help and industries and we have coming into action a weapon which will be unique.” [20]

The next day, Stimson expressed concerns that an upcoming meeting between Truman, Stalin and Churchill at Potsdam would take place before the first atomic test. “It may be necessary,” Stimson wrote, “to have it out with Russia on her relations to Manchuria and Port Arthur and various other parts of North China, and also the relations of China to us. Over any such tangled wave of problems the S-1 [code name for atomic bomb] secret would be dominant and yet we will not know until after that time probably, until after that meeting, whether this is a weapon in our hands or not. We think it will be shortly afterwards, but it seems a terrible thing to gamble with such big stakes in diplomacy without having your master card in your hand.” [21]

In the end, Truman had the Potsdam conference postponed for several weeks in order to give the Manhattan Project more time. On May 21, Joseph Davies, the former ambassador to the Soviet Union, reported on a meeting with Truman in which Truman said he “did not want to meet [at Potsdam] until July. He had his budget (*) on his hands. The test was set for June, but had been postponed until July.” At the bottom of the page, Davies added later an explanation of what he meant by “budget”: “Footnote (*): the atomic bomb. He told me then of the atomic bomb experiment in Nevada. Charged me with the utmost secrecy.” [22]

Thus officials in the Truman administration quite consciously saw the atomic bomb as the “master card” in its dealings with the Soviet Union. Because of uncertainty that the test would succeed, Truman went to Potsdam with his Secretary of State James Byrnes with the aim of again gaining a promise from the Soviet Union that it would enter the war

against Japan. Truman wrote in his diary, “If the test [of the atomic bomb] should fail, then it would be even more important to us to bring about a surrender [through a Soviet invasion] before we had to make a physical conquest of Japan.” [23]

The successful test of the atom bomb on July 16, shortly before the formal opening of the Potsdam Conference, gave Truman what he later called “a hammer on those boys.” [24] Truman’s demeanor at Potsdam completely changed, and he became much more aggressive and arrogant in negotiations with Stalin. During the initial days of the Potsdam Conference, Truman was still seeking to get assurance from the Soviet Union that it would join the war with Japan. However over the next several weeks, it is clear that administration officials hoped that use of the bomb would bring a quick end to the war before the Soviet invasion progressed very far and before Japan made a separate deal with Stalin.

This was certainly the position of Secretary of State Byrnes. Responding to a statement by Secretary of Navy James Forrestal that Truman had said “his principal objective at Potsdam would be to get Russia in the war,” Byrnes declared that “it was most probable that the President’s views changed; certainly that was not my view.” [25]

Truman and Byrnes became worried that Japan would try to reach a deal with the Soviet Union and sue for peace through the Soviet Union rather than through a neutral power or through the United States. These concerns were amplified by communications from Japan that were intercepted by the Americans. For example, the diplomatic summary of one intercepted Japanese message notes, “On 11 July [Japanese] Foreign Minister Togo sent the following ‘extremely urgent’ message to Ambassador [to the Soviet Union] Sato: ‘We are now secretly giving consideration to the termination of the war because of the pressing situation which confronts Japan both at home and abroad. Therefore, when you have your interview with [Soviet Foreign Minister] Molotov in accordance with previous instructions you should not confine yourself to the objective of a rapprochement between Russia and Japan but should also sound him out on the extent to which it is possible to make use of Russia in ending the war.’” The message went on to indicate that Japan was willing to give large concessions to Russia in order to prevent a Russian invasion. [26] At this point Japan still hoped that it could forestall a Soviet invasion.

A significant July 24 diary entry of Walter Brown, assistant to Secretary of State James Byrnes, records that, “JFB [Byrnes] still hoping for time, believing after atomic bomb Japan will surrender and Russia will not get in so much on the kill, thereby being in a position to press for claims against China.” [27] Later, on August 3, three days before Hiroshima, Brown writes, “Aboard Agusta/President, Leahy, JFB [Byrnes] agreed [sic] Japas [sic] looking for peace...President afraid they will sue for peace through Russia instead of some country like Sweden.” [28]

What these and other documents make clear is that not only were American leaders concerned that the war would end in a way favorable to the Soviet Union, but also that they knew Japan was very close to suing for peace. In his book *The Decision to Use the Atom Bomb*, Gar Alperovitz makes a convincing case for a “two-step” theory of Japanese surrender. According to Alperovitz, the combination of the Soviet invasion, which eventually took place on August 8, and a guarantee to the Japanese state that the position of the emperor would not be threatened, would have put an end to the war without an invasion and without the use of the atom bomb.

This indeed was the conclusion of a Joint Intelligence Committee report to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on April 29, 1945: “The increasing effects of air-sea blockade, the progressive and cumulative devastation wrought by strategic bombing, and the collapse of Germany (with its implications regarding redeployment) should make this realization [that absolute defeat is inevitable] widespread within the year...The entry of the USSR into the war, would, together with the foregoing factors, convince most Japanese at once of the inevitability of complete defeat...If...the Japanese people, as

well as their leaders, were persuaded both that absolute defeat was inevitable and that unconditional surrender did not imply national annihilation [that is, the removal of the emperor], surrender might follow fairly quickly.” [29]

Under the direction of Byrnes, the Potsdam Proclamation—an ultimatum to Japan demanding unconditional surrender—was worded in such a way that the guarantee to the emperor was not given. Moreover the US and Britain decided not to invite the Soviet Union to sign the proclamation. On the one hand, this made it clear that the US and Britain were taking their own route to a Japanese surrender. On the other hand, it made the threat of a Soviet invasion ambiguous, thus sustaining Japanese hopes of an eventual Soviet mediation. This made Japanese rejection of the proclamation a certainty, opening the way for the use of the bomb. [30]

Furthermore, the invasion of Japan by American troops was scheduled for November. If the American government used the bomb primarily to avoid the necessity of an invasion, it is impossible to explain why Truman did not wait longer before making the decision, particularly given the mountain of intelligence indicating the desperate position of Japan at the time.

Another question that emerges is why the second bomb was dropped so quickly, before the Japanese had a chance to understand what had happened in Hiroshima and to respond. Again, the question of the Soviet invasion is central. The bombing of Nagasaki occurred one day after this invasion began. Moreover, Alperovitz notes, “Truman declared that Rumania, Bulgaria, and Hungary were ‘not to be spheres of influence of any one power’ on August 9—the day of the Nagasaki bombing.” [31]

Bound up with the immediate interests of the United States in curtailing Soviet influence in Eastern Europe and East Asia was the general aim of the Truman administration to establish America’s hegemonic position following the end of the war. Historian Thomas McCormick summed it up well when he wrote, “In two blinding glares—a horrible end to a war waged horribly by all parties—the United States finally found the combination that would unlock the door to American hegemony.”

To achieve this hegemonic aim, it was necessary to sacrifice the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. McCormick notes, “A prearranged demonstration of the atomic bomb on a noninhabited target, as some scientists had recommended, would not do. That could demonstrate the power of the bomb, but it could not demonstrate the American will to use the awful power. One reason, therefore, for American unwillingness to pursue Japanese peace feelers in mid-summer 1945 was that the United States did not want the war to end before it had had a chance to use the atomic bomb.” [32]

There is a certain naïveté on the part of the American people with regard to the utter ruthlessness of the American ruling class, particularly in relation to the Second World War. That war has long been presented by the American media and political establishment as a great war for democracy, against fascism and tyranny. In fact, the principal reason that the United States entered the war—and the underlying motivation behind all its actions in prosecuting the war—was to establish itself as the dominant and unchallenged world power. In pursuit of this aim the lives of hundreds of thousands of Japanese were of little consequence.

The decision by the administration of President Harry Truman to use atomic weapons against Japan was motivated by political and strategic considerations. Above all, the use of the bomb was meant to establish the undisputed hegemonic position of the United States in the post-war period.

These motivations were also the basic driving force behind the American intervention in the war itself. The Second World War has long been presented to the American people as a “Good War,” a war for democracy against fascism and tyranny. While it was no doubt true that millions of Americans saw the war in terms of a fight against Hitlerite fascism and Japanese militarism, the aims of those who led them to war

were altogether different. The American ruling class entered the Second World War in order to secure its global interests. While the political character of the bourgeois democratic regime in the United States was vastly different than that of its fascist adversaries, the nature of the war aims of the United States were no less imperialistic. In the final analysis, the utter ruthlessness with which the United States sought to secure its objectives—including the use of the atomic bomb—flowed from this essential fact.

The American government hoped that by using the bomb it would shift the balance of forces in its growing conflict with the Soviet Union. However, the American monopoly of the bomb was short-lived. The Soviet Union responded to the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 by rapidly increasing the amount of resources devoted to its own atomic bomb project. In 1949, the Soviet Union carried out its first atomic weapon test.

Sections of the US ruling elite and military establishment still hoped that they might be able to use the bomb in actual military situations. In 1950, Truman threatened to use nuclear weapons against the Chinese during the Korean War, and General Douglas MacArthur urged the government to authorize the military to drop a number of bombs along the Korean border with Manchuria. These proposals were eventually rejected for fear that the use of the bomb might provoke a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union.

With the development of the much more powerful hydrogen bomb, first tested in late 1952, the US hoped to renew its nuclear advantage. The Republican Eisenhower administration came into office in 1953 pledging a more aggressive policy against the Soviet Union, including the “rollback” of Soviet control over Eastern Europe. In January 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles gave a speech in which he stated that the US would “deter aggression” by depending “primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate, instantly, by means and at places of our own choosing.” This pledge of “massive retaliation” was generally interpreted as a threat to use nuclear weapons in response to a local war such as the Korean War or the war that later developed in Vietnam.

However, this nuclear advantage was again eliminated in August 1953, when the USSR tested its first hydrogen bomb. The two countries rapidly developed a capacity that created conditions of “mutually assured destruction” in the event of a nuclear war.

Throughout this period and the following decades, a battle raged within the political establishment over policy in relation to the Soviet Union and the atom bomb. Even with the threat of nuclear war, there continued to exist a substantial section of the American ruling class that was unwilling to tolerate any constraints on American military power.

The option of engaging in nuclear war was never off the table for any post-Hiroshima/Nagasaki administration, Democratic or Republican. What Truman’s Secretary of War Henry Stimson called the “master card” was always there in the background ready to be pulled out if need be. In 1962, the Kennedy administration nearly initiated a nuclear war with the Soviet Union over the Cuban missile crisis.

As the economic situation deteriorated in the 1970s, those who advocated a more aggressive orientation toward the Soviet Union began to gain in prominence. This started under the Democratic Party administration of Jimmy Carter and received a boost during the Reagan administration in the 1980s. Reagan oversaw a renewed arms buildup and also sought to gain an offensive nuclear superiority by developing a defensive missile shield (the so-called “Star Wars” program), something that the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972 had been designed to prevent. A successful defensive shield would allow the US to strike with nuclear weapons first, since it could shoot down any retaliatory action.

Since the self-destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991, the American ruling class has reached a new consensus based upon preemptive war and

the unilateral assertion of American interests through military force.

Fewer treaties, more bombs

The post-Soviet eruption of American militarism has assumed an especially malignant form during the presidency of George W. Bush. Since coming into power, the Bush administration has developed a two-pronged strategy to expand American military capacity. On the one hand, it has rejected or undermined any international agreement or treaty that places boundaries on what the United States can or cannot do militarily. On the other hand, it has taken steps to develop its military technology, including its nuclear technology, to prepare the way for the use of this technology in future wars.

In 1999, the Republican-dominated US Senate went out of its way to reject the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which had previously been signed by the Clinton administration. In 2001, Bush announced that he would not seek Senate approval again, and instead would look for a way to “bury” the treaty. The treaty would ban the testing of new nuclear weapons, which the Bush administration opposes because it is planning on developing new nuclear weapons that it will need to test.

In December 2001, Bush announced that the US would unilaterally withdraw from the ABM Treaty in order to allow it to renew the “Star Wars” project, now called National Missile Defense. The development of a NMD system is still a priority of the administration, and is part of its drive to achieve military domination of space. Like the Reagan administration program, a missile defense system would open up the way for offensive nuclear strikes against countries such as China or Russia.

During an international review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) earlier this year, the Bush administration announced a position that was aimed at undermining the foundation of the agreement. In exchange for a promise not to acquire nuclear weapons, the treaty guarantees non-nuclear powers the right to develop non-military nuclear technology. The treaty also includes a pledge from the nuclear powers to gradually eliminate their nuclear stockpiles. The new Bush administration position, however, is to deny states that the US determines to be “rogue states,” such as Iran, the right to develop nuclear energy programs. At the same time, far from eliminating its own nuclear stockpiles, the US has taken steps to modernize its existing weapons and develop new weapons for offensive use. Indeed, in the run-up to the conference, which ended without an agreement, the Bush administration explicitly insisted on its right to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear power.

Over the past decade, the US government has developed a policy of offensive nuclear weapon use, rejecting the Cold War conception that nuclear weapons would be intended primarily as a deterrent. A Nuclear Posture Review in 1997 during the Clinton administration reportedly took the first steps toward targeting countries such as North Korea, China and Iran.

This policy was made explicit in another review, leaked to the press in 2002, in which the Pentagon announced that “the old process [of nuclear arms control] is incompatible with the flexibility US planning and forces now require.” It explicitly threatened a host of countries by targeting them for potential nuclear attack. It also provided very general guidelines for the future use of nuclear weapons, declaring that these weapons may be used “against targets able to withstand nonnuclear attack” or “in the event of surprising military developments.”

Last summer, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld issued an “Interim Global Strike Order” that reportedly includes a first strike nuclear option against a country such as Iran or North Korea. There were also nuclear weapons options in the planning guidelines for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Bush administration has taken steps toward the development of new “bunker-busting” nuclear weapons specifically designed for use in combat situations. Existing stockpiles have been modernized, and

according to a *New York Times* article from February 7, 2005, “American scientists have begun designing a new generation of nuclear arms meant to be sturdier and more reliable and to have longer lives” than the old weapon stockpiles.

The US repeatedly issues threats against countries over their alleged development of nuclear weapons and other “weapons of mass destruction.” The most recent target has been Iran, which the US has threatened with military attack if it does not abandon its nuclear energy program. All these threats are meant to justify future US invasions, in which the use of nuclear weapons by the United States is by no means excluded.

Through the policy of preemptive war, the US has arrogated for itself the right to attack any country that it deems to be a threat, or declares might be a threat sometime in the future. There is no part of the world in which the United States does not have an interest. It has sought to progressively expand its influence in Central Asia and the former Soviet Union through the war in Afghanistan and political intervention in countries such as Ukraine. It is seeking to dominate the Middle East through the war in Iraq and the threat of war in Iran. It is expanding its activities in Africa and has made repeated threats against North Korea and China as part of its efforts to secure its influence in East Asia.

Under these conditions, there are innumerable potential scenarios in which a war will erupt leading to the use of nuclear weapons. This includes not only invasions of countries such as Iran; an American war against a smaller power could easily spark a broader conflict—with China, Russia or even the powers of Europe, all of which have nuclear weapons themselves.

The catastrophe that befell Hiroshima and Nagasaki will never be forgotten. Their fate will stand forever as testimony to the bestiality of imperialism. Against the backdrop of the renewed eruption of American militarism, the events of August 1945 remind us of the alternatives that confront mankind—world revolution or world war, socialism or barbarism.

Notes:

[1] Wyden, Peter. *Day One: Before Hiroshima and After*, Simon and Schuster: New York, 1984, p. 253. [back]

[2] Frank, Richard. *Downfall: The End of Imperial Japanese Empire*, Random House: New York, p. 265. [back]

[3] Hida Shuntaro. “The Day Hiroshima Disappeared,” in *Hiroshima’s Shadows*, edited by Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz, The Pamphleteer’s Press, Stony Creek, Connecticut: 1998, p. 419. [back]

[4] Hachiya, Michihiko. *Hiroshima Diary*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 1955. p. 4. [back]

[5] Frank, p. 266. [back]

[6] Hachia, p. 14. [back]

[7] Okabe, Kosaku. “Hiroshima Flash,” in *Hibakusha: Survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, Kosei Publishing Co., Tokyo: 1986. p. 35. [back]

[8] Shuntaro, p. 419. [back]

[9] Hachiya, p.14. [back]

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 8. [back]

[11] Shuntaro, p. 428. [back]

[12] Frank, p. 468. [back]

[13] Figures given after the war about the number of American lives that would have been lost in an invasion were entirely mythical, and were conjured up largely post facto to justify the use of the bombs. This question will not be dealt with in this article, however an analysis can be found in Barton Bernstein’s essay “A Postwar myth: 500,000 US lives saved” in *Hiroshima’s Shadow*, edited by Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz, The Pamphleteer’s Press, Stony Creek, Connecticut: 1998. [back]

[14] One historian described the firebombing of Tokyo as follows: “The first planes that reached the Japanese capital dropped incendiaries

designed to start fires that would serve as markers in the target area for the bombers that followed. The target zone included industrial and commercial sites and densely populated residential districts with flimsy and highly flammable housing. Once the area was clearly delineated by flames, waves of B-29s dropped hundreds of tons of firebombs. They created a conflagration of monumental proportions, which was intensified by the winds that swept Tokyo that night. The fires consumed an area of about sixteen square miles, created so much turbulence that they tossed low-flying planes around in the air, and killed so many Japanese that the stench of burning flesh sickened crews in the B-29s.” (Walker, J. Samuel, *Prompt & Utter Destruction: Truman and the use of Atomic bombs against Japan*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 2004. p. 27.) [back]

[15] Stimson, Henry. Henry Stimson Papers, Sterling Library, Yale University. Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/15.pdf>. [back]

[16] “Notes of the Interim Committee Meeting Thursday, 31 May 1945, 10:00 A.M. to 1:15 P.M.—2:15 P.M. to 4:15 P.M.” p. 13-14. Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/12.pdf>. [back]

[17] Among these scientists was the great Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard, who while helping to develop the bomb came to have strong doubts about using it. In one passage of the minutes to the same meeting of the Interim Committee quoted above, General Leslie Groves, the general in charge of the Manhattan Project, warns of certain “undesirable scientists...of doubtful discretion and uncertain loyalty,” no doubt referring primarily to those concerned about the use of the bomb (Ibid. p. 14). The Interim Committee also rejected the idea that the nuclear technology should be shared with the international community in order to avoid a nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union, another position held by many of the scientists working on the project. [back]

[18] Offner, Arnold. *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953*, Stanford University Press, Stanford: 2002. p. 92. [back]

[19] Jackson, Gabriel. *Civilization & Barbarity in 20th-Century Europe*, Humanity Books, Amherst, New York: 1999. p. 176-77. Szilard noted pointedly in 1960: “If the Germans had dropped atomic bombs on cities instead of us, we would have defined the dropping of atomic bombs on cities as a war crime, and we would have sentenced the Germans who were guilty of this crime to death at Nuremberg and hanged them.” (From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki.) [back]

[20] Stimson, Henry. Henry Stimson Diary. May 14, 1945. p. 2 Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/7.pdf>. [back]

[21] Ibid., May 15, 1945. p. 1. [back]

[22] Davies, Joseph. Diary entry for May 21, 1945 Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/8.pdf>. [back]

[23] Quoted from Alperovitz, Gar. *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, Vintage Books, New York: 1995. p. 124. [back]

[24] Truman interview with Jonathan Daniels, November 12, 1949. Quoted from Alperovitz, p 239. [back]

[25] Quoted from Hasegawa, Tsuyoshi. *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman and the Surrender of Japan*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge: 2005. p. 158. [back]

[26] “‘Magic’—Diplomatic Summary, War Department, Office of Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, No. 1204—July 12, 1945, Top Secret Ultra.” Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/29.pdf>. [back]

[27] Quoted from Alperovitz, p. 268. [back]

[28] Quoted from Alperovitz, p. 415. [back]

[29] Quoted from Alperovitz, p. 113-114. [back]

[30] In his diary Truman wrote that he was “sure” that Japan will not accept the Potsdam Proclamation, “but we will have given them the chance.” That is, the proclamation was a pro forma statement meant to give some sort of justification for a decision that had already been made: the use of the atomic bomb. For a partial transcript of Truman’s diary see, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/38.pdf>. [back]

[31] Alperovitz, p. 429-30. [back]

[32] McCormick, Thomas J. *America’s Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 1995. p. 44 -45. [back]

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