Before the outbreak of World War II in 1939, German physicists, who had reached the front rank in science, had made considerable progress toward harnessing the atom. Scientists in France, Holland, Britain, and America had also been discovering the essential secrets of nuclear fission. Their ranks were swelled by refugees from vicious Hitlerian persecution, especially certain eminent physicists of the Jewish faith.

It is understandable that much of the pressure for pushing ahead with the atomic bomb should have come from these victims of Nazi tyranny. Jewish scientists driven from Germany especially feared that Hitler would finish first in the nuclear race. If the Nazis added the atomic bomb to their arsenal before the democracies could produce it, Germany obviously would be in a position to enslave much of the world. Acting as the spokesman for exiled Jewish scientists in America, the famed Albert Einstein addressed an appeal to President Roosevelt on August 2, 1939, almost exactly a month before Hitler burst into Poland. Not until December 6, 1941, the day before Pearl Harbor, did Washington make the momentous decision to go ahead full throttle with the nuclear bomb. Roosevelt managed to secure from Congress blank-check appropriations of some $2 billion to carry through this top-secret "Manhattan Project."

Many of the refugee scientists who prompted action evidently had in view not using the bomb but holding it as a safeguard against atomic blackmail by a merciless Hitler. They could not even be sure that he did not have this frightful weapon when the Allies invaded Europe in 1944. They soon made the ironical discovery that the bomb was not needed for the primary purpose originally intended; the German physicists were lagging substantially behind the pace set by their enemies. Hitler, counting on a relatively short and victorious war, had given higher priority to missile development and other new weapons. Allied scientists clearly won "the battle of the laboratories."

War with Germany ended in May 1945, but the practice had been accepted on both sides of gutting great cities with explosive or incendiary bombs. In principle, there was no essential difference between a block-busting bomb and a city-busting bomb, especially when the

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4 See Leo Szilard, "Reminiscences," Perspectives in Amer. Hist., II (1968), 94-151, for the recollections of an influential refugee scientist.

5 The bomb was a cooperative project. It involved a pooling of British and American industrial capacity and technical know-how, plus the indispensable skills of the European émigré scientists.
American decision makers were not too much concerned about compassion. The Nipponese had treacherously hit below the belt at Pearl Harbor, and they had meted out inhumane treatment to American prisoners. Anyhow, Japan had already suffered severely from fire-bombing raids on Tokyo — raids that had probably cost more lives than those taken by either of the two atomic bombs. By hastening the end of the war, so the argument ran, the United States would be conferring a favor on the Japanese — a kind of “mercy killing.” A prolonging of conventional attacks, including aerial bombing, would take a terrible toll and perhaps leave even more lasting bitterness.

In later years a number of lower-echelon scientists claimed that the military used the bomb for lethal purposes over their protests. But President Truman’s close scientific advisors, in possession of the broad spectrum of the essential facts — technical, strategic, and political — were in unanimous agreement. A list was made of the four Japanese cities most essential to war production, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki happened to be among them. Little if anything was then known about the long-range effects of nuclear radiation, including possible genetic damage. In the light of the information then possessed by the key officials in Washington, the course adopted seemed entirely proper. Prime Minister Churchill agreed heartily, and President Truman repeatedly declared in later years that if he had to make the same decision again, he would not do differently. He was prone to remark that those who were shedding tears over the Japanese were not weeping over the Americans deceitfully done to death at Pearl Harbor.

**WAS JAPAN SURRENDERING WHEN “ATOMIZED”?**

As early as February 1945, the Japanese had sent out preliminary feelers to the Soviets in the hope of promoting mediation between America and Japan. Evidently not knowing that Stalin was bound by the Yalta agreements to attack the Japanese after Hitler’s defeat, Tokyo tried again in July without success. Washington was not only aware of these overtures but was also informed of them by Stalin at the Potsdam Conference of July 1945.

**WAS THE DROPPING OF THE A-BOMB IMPERATIVE?**

Persuasive indeed were the arguments advanced by those who urged using the bomb against the Japanese. Top American strategists calculated that the conquest of Japan would take some eighteen months and cost a million or so casualties, not counting those of Japanese soldiers and civilians. Japan had some 2,000,000 troops defending her homeland, with about 3,000,000 abroad, plus some 5,000 bomb-laden kamikaze (suicide) airplanes, which could take a frightful toll. The Japanese militarists were determined to make a last-ditch, hara-kiri stand, and only by the narrowest of margins was this mad course averted. First came the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, August 6; then the Russian declaration of war, August 8; and finally the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, August 9. The Americans had evidently harnessed divine wrath, and the Japanese would not lose face unconscionably if they surrendered to a foe in league with the supernatural. Peace came only after the bombs had jolted Nippon into submission.

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7 The Japanese also had 7,000 kamikaze planes in storage or undergoing repair, and 5,000 young men training as their pilots. Samuel E. Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (1943), XIV, 352. Kamikaze planes inflicted grave damage on U. S. warships during the Okinawa campaign.
8 The key advisory body was the Interim Committee, consisting of five top officials and civilians, plus four eminent scientists, all of whom were advised by four other top-level scientists.
9 Hiroshima, in addition to war production, quartered the defensive Second Army, which was virtually wiped out. Morison, *U. S. Naval Operations*, XIV, 344.
There can be no doubt that by the summer of 1945 the insular Japanese were facing certain defeat. Their navy was shattered; their armies were riddled; their cities were being laid waste with fire bombs; their merchant marine was substantially wiped out by American submarines; and their industrial production was crippled. They were like a cut chrysanthemum, gradually fading and doomed to die.

Surrender by Japan was delayed by two principal obstacles. One was the face-saving, suicidal spirit of the militarists; the other was the inelastic policy of unconditional surrender. On July 26, 1945, the Allied conferes at the Potsdam Conference in Germany issued a manifesto to Japan: either she must surrender unconditionally or suffer “prompt and utter destruction.” 11 Tragically, the Potsdam Declaration did not reveal that America then possessed an atomic bomb of unimaginable destructiveness that could be used to wipe out the Japanese.

Also tragic is the fact that subsequently Japan was granted conditions, at her request, of less than unconditional surrender; namely, the retention of her Emperor. With a millennium-long tradition of imperial succession, this concession meant more to her people than West­erners could realize. If the Potsdam ultimatum had shown a willingness to keep the Emperor, the Japanese might have saved enough “face” to surrender before the United States felt compelled to drop the atomic bomb. But making concessions to Japan was regarded as a species of “appeasement” that might be interpreted as a sign of military weakness and weariness, especially after heavy American losses in the recent Okinawa campaign. Even some staunch defenders of America’s decision to resort to instant incineration blame the authors of the Potsdam Declaration for not having been more specific. The argument goes that the Japanese should have been bluntly informed of the atomic bomb—a weapon of unparalleled explosiveness—reinforced by photographs of the first nuclear cloud at Alamogordo, New Mexico. If this had only been done, the Japanese might have surrendered without having two of their cities destroyed, with a loss of some 100,000 lives at Hiroshima and some 75,000 at Nagasaki.

Such a conclusion is highly speculative. “Unconditional surrender” was still a major obstacle, and many Japanese leaders would have dismissed reference to an apocalyptic weapon as “Yankee bluff.” In this case the bombs would have been dropped, but the Americans would have been in a stronger moral position after having more specifically warned their intended victim. 12

As events turned out, Tokyo did not respond officially to the Potsdam ultimatum but unofficially announced a determination to “ignore it entirely. . . .” An unfortunate translation of this response as reported in the Tokyo press led to the impression that the warning had not only been rejected but rejected contemptuously. 13 Speaking informally some years later, President Truman reportedly remarked that all he got was a “snotty” answer, whereupon the United States let the “Japs” have it.

SHOULD THE U.S. HAVE DEMONSTRATED THE A-BOMB?

Critics of Truman’s “inhuman” decision have argued that he should first have ordered a demonstration of the bomb in some desert area or in a thinly populated region of Japan. Once the Japanese had witnessed the incredible frightfulness of this monster weapon, they would surely have hoisted the white flag of surrender.

This possibility was thoroughly discussed in Washington, but the objections were so weighty that the proposed demonstration was rejected by the Interim Committee. First of all, the United States then had only two atomic bombs and was not scheduled to get a third until about ten days after the second one was dropped. Moreover, after elaborate arrangements for an exhibition, the bomb might not explode, and in this event the Americans would look like bluffers. 14 If a thinly peopled target in Japan should be announced in advance, what was to prevent the Japanese from sending up fighter planes or moving American prisoners of war to that spot? Finally, detonating the bomb in a desert area would wreak much less visible damage than on a city. The Japanese might not be sufficiently impressed; significantly, the two bombs that wiped out two Japanese cities did not budge the top military and naval men in Japan. 15

If the decision makers in Washington had only known then what they were to know later, they might have staged a demonstration in spite of these objections. They were evidently not aware of long-run...

14 The United States suffered much embarrassment in the 1950s and 1960s from pioneering space rockets that failed to function properly.
15 Morison, U. S. Naval Operations, XIV, 351. Some critics condemn the use of the second bomb, contending that one would have served its purpose.
radioactive damage, of genetic harm, of the revulsion in much of the civilized world, and of the alleged racism involved in dropping the bomb only on yellow people. Yet, given the British bombing of refugee-crowded Dresden (some 135,000 deaths) and attacks on other German cities, as well as Hitler’s earlier ruthlessness against Rotterdam and London, there is little reason to believe that the perfected A-bomb would not have been used on the Germans if deemed necessary. As events turned out, Germany surrendered three months before the first bomb was ready to be dropped.

WAS THE A-BOMB AIMED PRIMARILY AT RUSSIA?

In 1965 the sensational thesis was advanced in detail by a writer of the New Left school that Truman used the bomb to show the Russians that Uncle Sam had atomic muscle, and to warn them to be acquiescent in American postwar policy or suffer possible destruction. Such Machiavellian motivation is supported by inference rather than convincing proof. It had much earlier been voiced by Russian propagandists and others who cried “atomic blackmail.” Soviet officials at the time publicly expressed no such fears.

The Soviet Union had proved to be a suspicious ally during the war and an untrustworthy one even before the fall of Hitler. Already on record were the Russian takeovers of Eastern Europe, including Poland and Rumania, in defiance of the “free election” pledges made by Stalin at Yalta in February 1945. The desirability of keeping Russia “in line” crossed the minds of some of the top decision makers, who quite properly considered all possible angles when they decided to use the bomb. Some of them even thought that after spending about $2 billion on this supergadget, the American taxpayers ought to have some fireworks for their money. If the bomb had not been dropped and the war had been prolonged bloodily, the voters would have been outraged upon learning that this lethal atomic weapon had been kept on the shelf.

To argue that the bomb was dropped primarily to impress the USSR ignores the hard fact that there were other and more pressing reasons for devastating Japan. These boiled down to winning the Far Eastern conflict in a hurry and saving American (and Japanese) lives in the process. The Americans notoriously fought World War II without adequate attention to its political aftermath; otherwise they would have been more interested in snatching much of Central and Eastern Europe from the advancing Russians.

Although the Russians had been difficult allies, they were allies, and a great reservoir of goodwill still existed for them in America. There was still a lively hope of cooperating with them in the United Nations. The Japanese were not only enemies, but bitter enemies; atrocities were common on both sides; and the Japanese often fought suicidal engagements rather than fall into the hands of the mayhem-minded Yankees. Critics are prone to forget that the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, not simply because the Japanese were nonwhite, but because they were widely regarded as a subhuman foe from whom vengeance for Pearl Harbor must be exacted. Millions of Americans favored hanging the Emperor as a war criminal, with or without a trial. There were otherwise decent citizens who regretted that the Japanese surrendered before the United States had an opportunity to obliterate a few more Japanese cities, including men, women, and children.

DID THE A-BOMB SAVE AMERICAN LIVES?

The argument that dropping the A-bombs in August 1945 saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of American “boys” has one basic weakness. The first landing of United States troops on Japanese soil was not scheduled until November 1945, and various delays such as those that had hampered the invasion of North Africa and France probably would have held up operations for at least several more weeks. Because all other serious ground fighting between the Japanese and Americans had ended, no heavy losses to U. S. troops could have occurred before Japan had been subjected to about three more months of blasting and firebombing from the air, plus blockading and bombarding from the sea.

It is conceivable that the Japanese could have continued their last-ditch stand in the absence of the A-bomb, which narrowly tipped the scales for surrender. During such resistance, hundreds of thousands

18 W. D. Leahy, I Was There (1950), p. 441. Admiral Leahy reports that Truman was aware of this motivation.
20 For a controversial journalistic book branding Hirohito the archconspirator in plotting war, see David Wergamini, Japan’s Imperial Conspiracy (1971).
21 The two bombs, plus Russia’s entry and assurances that the Emperor might be retained, did not bring capitulation. Only by the personal intervention of the Emperor was surrender achieved, amid suicides, assassinations, and attempted assassinations. Morison, U. S. Naval Operations, XIV, 349–350.
of Japanese, including women and children, would probably have perished from the "conventional explosives" of American bombers. If the Americans and their allies had been forced to land with large bodies of troops, they would have been subjected to severe losses, for the Japanese possessed enormous quantities of weapons and ammunition.

Yet a delay of three months while waiting for Japan to surrender was not pleasing to Americans. The war was appallingly costly in dollars; the Allies were war-weary; the American troops, especially those being redeployed from Europe, were eager to resume interrupted lives. In view of these considerations and others, there was strong pressure on Washington to end the war, in Secretary Stimson's words, "with maximum force and maximum speed." The A-bombs probably contributed significantly to that end, even though questions of humanity later took on larger dimensions. As events turned out, whatever moral advantage America had gained from the Japanese sneak attack at Pearl Harbor was more than wiped out by the nuclear bombing of a staggering foe.

Even so, two fortuitous developments evidently flowed from using the horrendous new weapon. As President Truman and his advisors hoped, the war ended suddenly, before the Soviets could get a boot in the door of Japan. As a consequence, the occupying American forces were able to create a democratic Nippon. The dropping of the bomb, presaging vastly more horrible explosives, may have demonstrated the terrible inhumanity of such devices so forcefully as to preclude their use in future conflicts. World opinion certainly helped to restrain the United States in the subsequent Korean and Vietnam Wars. Poison gas had been used with lethal effect in World War I, but it was not employed in World War II. Both sides had mutually intimidating stockpiles, but this was a ruinous game that two could play.

**DID RUSSIA "STEAL" THE A-BOMB FROM THE U.S.?**

During the years immediately after World War II, many Americans comforted themselves with the delusion that the "backward" Russians could not possibly develop an atomic bomb within the near future. Experts in the United States were speaking in terms of five to fifteen years, even if captured German physicists helped the Soviets. Meanwhile America could drastically reduce its costly military establishment, while counting on its arsenal of nuclear weapons to keep the Russians "in line." Winston Churchill expressed the opinion in 1949 that America's possess-

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