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Rethinking the Utility of Nuclear Weapons

Ward Wilson

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The parameters of the discussion about nuclear weapons are well known and appear to be relatively fixed. It seems as if there has been little new on that front in forty years. Most civilian scholars have lost interest in nuclear weapons and moved on to other topics. But it is the habit of the military mind to learn from the past; even today there are lessons to be learned from Cannae, Waterloo, and Vicksburg. It will not surprise thoughtful military officers to find that the past has something important and interesting to tell us about nuclear weapons.

The conventional wisdom is that nuclear weapons are horrible, probably immoral, but necessary. We keep them because they have a unique ability to coerce and deter. There are psychological characteristics to the weapons—as Secretary of War Henry Stimson pointed out in the first semiofficial discussion of them in 1947—that make them unlike other weapons.¹

Now new evidence is throwing doubt on these decades-old conclusions. Actually not “new” evidence, but additional evidence culled from a careful study of the past.

Hiroshima

The first and most important revision to history has to do with the efficacy of bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki.² This new evidence, however, has nothing to do with the “revisionist” school of Hiroshima history. The revisionist school ascended in 1964 with the publication by Gar Alperovitz of a book arguing that bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki was unnecessary—the Japanese would have surrendered anyway.³ This debate has caused controversy and aroused passions for almost fifty years. But it is not really about nuclear weapons. The revisionists argue that the bombings were horrible and, since they weren’t necessary to win the war, they were immoral. The counterrevisionists argue that the bombings were required and were, therefore, moral. But this is a debate about whether the United States acted morally, not about whether nuclear weapons work. New evidence seems to suggest that while the bombs destroyed the cities, they didn’t play much of a role (or perhaps any) in convincing Japan’s leaders to surrender.

1 Henry L. Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” *Harper’s Magazine*, 194/1161 (1947): 97-107.

2 See chapter one of Ward Wilson, *Five Myths About Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013) and Ward Wilson, “The Winning Weapon? Rethinking Nuclear Weapons in Light of Hiroshima,” *International Security* 31, no. 4 (Spring 2007): 162-179.

3 Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam; the Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation With Soviet Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).

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Over the last twenty years, increasing access to records in Japan, Russia, and the United States has revealed that in the three days following the bombing of Hiroshima Japan's leaders had little idea that they had to surrender as a result of the bombings.⁴ Meeting notes, diary entries, and the actions that various actors took during this period show that while Japan's leaders knew Hiroshima had been destroyed by a nuclear weapon, they saw this as another problem in an already difficult war, not a war-ending crisis. The Foreign Minister, Togo Shigenori, actually suggested convening the Supreme Council two days after the bombing of Hiroshima to discuss it and found he could not generate enough interest on the subject to get it on the agenda.

When the Soviet Union, which had signed a five-year neutrality pact with Japan in 1941, broke that agreement and joined the war at midnight on 8-9 August, however, it touched off a crisis. Within hours of the news reaching Tokyo, the Supreme Council met to discuss unconditional surrender. It is clear from all the evidence now available that Japan's leaders surrendered because of the Soviet entry into the war and not because of the nuclear bombings.

There are reasons to doubt the traditional story that the Emperor was horrified by the bombing of Hiroshima. The documentary evidence is thin,⁵ and if the Emperor was so moved, it begs the question: why was he moved by secondhand reports of a city destroyed in August when he was not moved by driving through Tokyo and personally witnessing the devastation of that city in March? Would it not be sensible to expect that firsthand experience would have a stronger emotional impact than a secondhand report?⁶

In some ways, this new conclusion about Hiroshima makes sense. In order to believe that Hiroshima was the cause of Japan's surrender, it was necessary to believe that Japan's military men didn't know their business. After all, the destruction of a city at that stage of the war was hardly militarily decisive. The United States Army Air Force had pounded 66 cities into rubble and ashes that summer using conventional bombs.

4 For new research that first began to question the role of the bomb and to emphasize the role of the Soviet Union (to a greater or lesser extent), see: John W. Dower, *Japan in War and Peace: Selected Essays* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); Robert A. Pape "Why Japan Surrendered," *International Security* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 154-201; Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Sadao Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender: A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review* 67, no. 4 (November 1998): 477-512; Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Random House, 1999); Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); Forrest E. Morgan, *Compellence and the Strategic Culture of Imperial Japan: Implications for Coercive Diplomacy in the Twenty-first Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). A particularly detailed and useful summary of recent scholarship that also contains reproductions of many primary source documents, is in William Burr, ed., "The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II: A Collection of Primary Sources," *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 162*, National Security Archive, August 5, 2005, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/index.htm>.

5 At best what we know is that the Emperor sent several messages to his adjutant asking for more information about the Hiroshima bombing. This could indicate concern and horror. It could also signal something as unemotional as a desire to understand the strategic capabilities of the weapon.

6 Especially since after the bombing the streets of Tokyo were filled with the burned bodies of the more than 100,000 who died in the fires. The toll was so great that it took 14 days to clear all the bodies from the streets. The Emperor made his tour of the city eight days after the bombing, so it is possible he not only saw the damage done to the city but saw some of the bodies of those killed in the attack.

Why would the loss of two more cities make a difference? It is clear that the Soviet entry into the war decisively changed the strategic calculus, while the dropping of atomic bombs, no matter how horrifying, did not.

And the scale of the nuclear bombings was not that different from the conventional attacks that had been going on all summer long. If we graph the fatalities in all 68 city attacks that summer, Hiroshima ranks second after Tokyo (a conventional attack). If we graph the square miles destroyed, Hiroshima is sixth. If we graph the percentage of the city destroyed, Hiroshima is 17th. Clearly, the end result of the attacks was not outside the parameters of previous attacks.

Of course Japan's leaders, beginning with the Emperor, repeatedly declared that the atomic bombings were decisive, forcing them to surrender. This makes a certain amount of sense, however. Put yourself in their shoes. Which would you rather say? "We made strategic mistakes. The Navy and Army could never cooperate properly on joint missions. Your government and soldiers let you down." Or would you rather say, "The enemy made an amazing scientific breakthrough that no one could have predicted, they invented a miracle weapon, and that's why we lost"? The atomic bomb made the perfect explanation for losing the war.

What does this reconsideration of the historical evidence mean today? The doctrine and tactics for using nuclear weapons have changed considerably in the last sixty-eight years. But it is important to remember that Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the only field tests of these weapons. Our belief in the special psychological ability of these weapons to coerce and deter—which forms the foundation for deterrence theory—is based almost entirely on this one event.⁷ We may have overestimated the ability of these weapons to deter or cow opponents. At any rate, simple prudence dictates that we undertake a fundamental reevaluation of nuclear deterrence policy if we are going to rely on these weapons for our security.

Cuban Missile Crisis

The second important revision to earlier ideas comes in the area of Cold War crises. Most people believe the evidence of Cold War crises uniformly demonstrates nuclear deterrence reliably controls violence in a crisis. The Cuban Missile Crisis illustrates the point. It is axiomatic that the crisis and its outcome support the conclusion that nuclear deterrence works. After all, the Soviets snuck missiles into Cuba, there was a risk of nuclear war, and then they took them out. This is the way nuclear deterrence is supposed to work—a leader sees the danger of nuclear war and pulls back; however, although Khrushchev's behavior can be seen as supporting nuclear deterrence theory, Kennedy's cannot.⁸

7 One could argue, of course, that our belief in nuclear deterrence is based on the success of ordinary deterrence—deterring people from committing crimes, for example. But ordinary deterrence fails quite often. There are many murders, even in states with the death penalty. One could argue that faith in nuclear deterrence comes from success in Cold War crises. But since deterrence occurs in the head of an adversary this is less than reliable evidence. The best evidence about the psychological impact of the use of nuclear weapons in wartime is the actual use of nuclear weapons in wartime.

8 Although even Khrushchev's behavior is not necessarily proof that nuclear deterrence worked. It could be argued, after all, that Khrushchev withdrew the missiles because he liked the deal he got: a no invasion pledge for Cuba and a commitment to withdraw theater missiles from Turkey.

President Kennedy was confronted with a crisis. He knew that if he blockaded Cuba he would touch off a crisis that could lead to nuclear war. In the week-long secret discussions that led to his decision, he and his advisors alluded to the possibility of nuclear war 60 times.⁹ Yet despite the danger, Kennedy went ahead, undeterred. How does that align with nuclear deterrence theory?

Recent scholarship on the crisis, particularly Michael Dobbs's fascinating book *One Minute to Midnight*, reveals the Cuban Missile Crisis came within a hair's breadth of going nuclear three separate times.¹⁰ Nuclear war was averted not by the efficient functioning of nuclear deterrence, but by chance.

The clearest example comes from a routine air sampling mission over the North Pole by a U-2 spy plane at the height of the crisis. When the plane's navigation malfunctioned and it flew 300 miles into Russia, Soviet MiGs were scrambled to shoot it down. US fighters in Alaska were scrambled to escort the U-2 back. This occurred at the height of the crisis, however, and conventional air-to-air missiles on the US fighters had been removed and replaced with *nuclear* air-to-air missiles. The US fighters had no other armament *except* nuclear missiles in the event of an encounter with Soviet fighters. Fortunately, none of them encountered the other.¹¹

It is clear, however, that Robert Kennedy was right when he later wrote, "President Kennedy had initiated the course of events, but he no longer had control over them."¹² President Kennedy took actions that risked nuclear war (and very nearly led to it). If nuclear deterrence causes leaders to see the risk of nuclear war and withdraw, how can we explain Kennedy's actions?

There are two striking things about this reinterpretation of the Cuban Missile Crisis. First is the clear failure of nuclear deterrence—a failure that did not lead to nuclear war, but a failure nonetheless. More interesting is the fact that historians and policy analysts have tended to ignore these facts. A review of the Cold War reveals these same two elements recur again and again in other crises: risky and aggressive actions are taken despite the danger of nuclear war and a clear tendency to overlook or explain away the failures.

The conclusion drawn from this new research into Cold War crises is not that nuclear deterrence does not work. There is no question that ordinary deterrence works at least some of the time. It is not perfect. People still commit murder even when severe penalties ought to deter them; however, it clearly works some of the time. Nuclear deterrence works at least some of the time. Nuclear war is a scary prospect few can ignore. What this new scholarship reveals is that the failure rate of nuclear deterrence is potentially higher than theory admits.

9 See Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis, The Concise Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002).

10 Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).

11 *Ibid.*, 264.

12 Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Signet Books, 1968), 70-1.

Nuclear deterrence has to be perfect, or close to perfect. A catastrophic all-out nuclear war could result from any failure of nuclear deterrence, so there is little margin for error. One could say for nuclear deterrence, failure is not an option. Yet these documented cases of nuclear deterrence failure raise the possibility that we have been far luckier, and have run far greater risks, than we imagined. If nuclear deterrence has a high rate of failure, continuing to rely on it for the safety and security of the United States would seem to guarantee its eventual catastrophic failure.

One of the great strengths of the military mind is its insistence on experience-based thinking. In the case of nuclear weapons, there has historically been plenty of theory, but not as much sensible, pragmatic thinking. It is time for a little more pragmatic analysis.

