
Interpreting Atomic Bomb History

A Response to Bernstein

— ♦ —

EDWARD W. FULLER

We seek truth, not guilt; we want to know how things came about to understand them, not to issue condemnations. . . . History should teach us to recognize causes and to understand driving forces; and when we understand everything, we will forgive everything.

—Ludwig von Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*

[We] advocated Free Trade, not merely on account of the material wealth which it would bring to the community, but for the far loftier motive of securing permanent peace between nations.

—Richard Cobden, in *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy*

Barton J. Bernstein is a giant on the subject of the atomic bombing of Japan. Any author who receives a lengthy critical reply from this eminent scholar must be honored and nervous at the same time. With all due respect, however, Bernstein’s reply does not advance the debate. My original paper, published in the Summer 2023 issue of this journal, was titled “An Economic Case against the Atomic Bombing of Japan.” In a critical reply to a paper with this title, one might expect to find an economic case *for* the atomic bombing of Japan. Bernstein never

Edward W. Fuller, MBA, can be contacted at Edward.W.Fuller@gmail.com.

The Independent Review, v. 28, n. 3, Winter 2023/24, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2023, pp. 401-410.

attempts an economic defense of the atomic bombing. Even more disappointingly, he asserts the primacy of politics over economics in the atomic bombing debate. Bernstein's reply can be seen as counterproductive, for it distracts from the central economic lessons of the atomic bombing.

Ethics and Data

Bernstein opens his reply with two criticisms: (1) the paper's treatment of the ethical issues is inadequate, and (2) some of the data seem questionable. On the first issue, Bernstein is unfair to criticize the paper for failing to deal adequately with ethical issues. As the title of the paper makes clear, this was an *economic* case against the atomic bombing; it was not an *ethical* case. The paper never claimed it would treat the ethical issues in full detail. Indeed, that would be impossible in a 10,000-word paper on wartime economics.

On the second criticism, much of the data used in the paper comes from John Ellis's encyclopedic work titled *World War 2, A Statistical Survey* (1993). While questioning this data, Bernstein never provides a comprehensive set of alternative economic data. Here is a simple challenge to Bernstein: Provide an alternative set of economic data that show the following: (1) Japan had an economic advantage over the United States, (2) the Japanese wartime economy was flourishing in 1945, and (3) U.S. war goods production was increasing in 1945.

Such economic data must be the basis of any successful economic case *for* the atomic bombing of Japan. Bernstein does not provide such a data set. Why? Such a data set does not exist, and it will never exist. Since the data he requires are non-existent, Bernstein's reply devolves into much tedious nitpicking over the data that actually do exist. Does this tactic succeed?

First, Bernstein never challenges the fact that the U.S. had an enormous advantage over Japan in the *absolute* size of war goods production. Thus he fails to address the first central claim in the paper—namely, that the U.S. had an overwhelming advantage over Japan in war goods production. Since he cannot challenge the *absolute* size of war production, Bernstein is forced to quibble over the *trends* in war production.

On U.S. trends, Bernstein attempts to undercut U.S. war goods production data from 1945 by highlighting that there were only eight months of war. Statisticians will not find this stratagem convincing. All Bernstein had to do was convert the annual production data into daily, weekly, or monthly data. This would not have helped his case, so let's do it for him. Consider monthly U.S. war goods production from 1943, 1944, and 1945, shown in table 1.

Even if 1945 production data are adjusted for only eight months of war, there is a downward trend in U.S. production of war goods after 1943. This downward trend would be inexplicable if U.S. planners believed Japan was an existential threat

Table 1
U.S. Production of War Goods 1943–45 (Monthly Average)

War Good	1943 (12 months)	1944 (12 months)	1945 (8 months)	% Change (1943–45)
Rifles	473,583	290,750	197,250	-58.3
Pistols	57,167	29,000	25,875	-54.7
Machine Guns	69,167	66,583	37,875	-45.2
Small-Arms Rounds	1,625,000,000	566,666,667	562,500,000	-65.4
Artillery	5,629	2,797	2,462	-56.3
Military Trucks	52,625	49,747	40,987	-22.1
Tanks	2,458	1,464	1,496	-39.1
Total Aircraft	7,158	8,027	6,220	-13.1
Anti-aircraft Guns	2,000	792	100	-95.0
Carriers	5	4	2	-60.0
Destroyers	11	6	8	-27.3

Source: See table 27 in Fuller (2023, 114) for the annual data. In the table above, the annual data for 1943 and 1944 are converted to a monthly averages by dividing all figures by 12. The annual data for 1945 are converted to monthly averages by dividing all figures by 8.

after 1943. For context, one hundred fifty thousand Allied troops landed on the first day of the D-Day invasion of Normandy, and some four thousand Allied troops were killed (Hanson 2017, 287–88). U.S. war goods production should have been skyrocketing in 1945 if the Allied war planners had expected an invasion of Japan that would cost “the loss of a million American lives and half that number of British” (Churchill, quoted in Miles 1985, 123).

On Japanese trends, Bernstein’s quibbling over the data never shows that the Japanese war machine was in good shape in 1945. For example, consider his comments on Japan’s oil stock in 1945. He claims the “the total oil stock at the end of 1945 is 11.7 million barrels, and not 3.7 million barrels.” He insists that 11.7 million barrels is “very far above 3.7 million barrels.” Does Bernstein suggest 11.7 million barrels of oil made the atomic bombing necessary?

Even if we accept Bernstein’s figure, 11.7 million barrels is minuscule. For context, the U.S. produced 1.452 billion barrels of oil in 1945. Nazi Germany consumed 10.3 million barrels of aviation fuel—not oil, but precious aviation fuel—in 1944 (Ellis 1993, 276). Today, Japan consumes 3.3 million barrels of oil per *day*. Contrary to Bernstein, 3.7 million barrels versus 11.7 million barrels does not yield “significantly differing conclusions about Japan’s available oil resources.” Both figures indicate that Japan had essentially zero oil at the time of the atomic bombing and was thus paralyzed. His treatment of the Japanese oil problem only underscores Bernstein’s quibbling approach to handling the economic data.

Let's push Bernstein's line of thought to the extreme. Rather than 11.7 million barrels, imagine Japan had oil stocks ten times greater in 1945—117 million barrels. Would this save Japan? No. Having an adequate stock of oil is not enough; you must also be able to move it. Even if Japan had oil stocks much larger than Bernstein's figure, it was totally incapable of transporting oil to key strategic locations in 1945. The oil example illustrates the vertical nature of the U.S. war strategy against Japan.

Indeed, Bernstein's approach to the data suggests that he does not truly appreciate the vertical nature of the U.S. economic war against Japan. U.S. war planners did not simply attack one part of a good's supply chain. Rather, they waged economic war vertically across a good's entire supply chain. This vertical strategy guaranteed that solving a single problem was never enough; the Japanese would have to solve many different problems across many different supply chains to turn the war against the U.S. This strategy of vertical economic warfare was deliberately planned before the war (Miller 2007).

Those who fully appreciate the vertical nature of the U.S. economic war against Japan will realize that nitpicking over existing data cannot overturn the economic case against the bombing. The vertical strategy of the U.S. guarantees that quibbling over a single data point will never be enough; the critic will have to provide new data across many different supply chains to undermine the economic case against the atomic bombing. As stressed above, an economic case for the atomic bombing will require a new, comprehensive, and coherent set of economic data. Since he did not provide such a data set, Bernstein failed to overturn the economic case against the atomic bombing of Japan.

The Alleged Conceptual Problem

After dealing with the first two criticisms, Bernstein turns to his third criticism. It is a problem "even more serious" than the problems with ethics and data. He describes it as a "conceptual problem." Bernstein states that "Fuller's analysis is explicitly structured in one way, but somewhat unfolds in another." He even claims that "Fuller does what he indicates, early in his essay, is illogical." What is this conceptual problem, and does it exist?

The alleged conceptual problem involves statements from government officials. Readers of *The Independent Review* know all too well that statements from government officials are not always reliable. Unfortunately, the debate over the atomic bombing has become overly reliant on statements from government officials. Most famously, both Harry S. Truman and Winston Churchill claimed that the atomic bombing of Japan "saved millions of lives" (Truman, quoted in Alperovitz 1995, 517). The claim that the atomic bombings saved millions is perhaps the most popular slogan used to defend the bombings. Bernstein (1986; 1999) has done great work to challenge the postwar myth that the bombings saved millions.

Paragraph four (page 88) of the original paper is a warning against overreliance on statements from government officials in the debate over the atomic bombing of Japan. Bernstein misinterprets this warning as a complete and utter prohibition. Here is a simple question: Does the original paper claim that historians of the atomic bombing of Japan must *never* use statements from government officials?

A fair reader must answer no. In fact, the paragraph states that such statements “can be crucial.” The point was that statements from government officials *alone* cannot settle the debate over the atomic bombing. As stated in the original paper, the facts contained in statements from government officials need to be “independently verified and interpreted.” Bernstein’s charge of a conceptual problem is the product of misinterpreting a simple warning as an absolute ban on statements from government officials.

Those who analyze the structure of the arguments in the original paper will notice that there is a “facts first, then statements second” framework. The economic facts are presented first. When statements from government officials are used, such statements are presented after the economic facts. For example, consider the statement from General Carter on page 104 of the original paper. On that page, table 22 is used first to show the pathetic state of Japanese merchant shipping in 1945. Then comes the passage from Carter on merchant shipping. In this framework, the facts on merchant shipping are presented first, and they are primary. The passage from Carter is a provided second to illustrate that U.S. government officials were *aware* that Japan had a serious merchant shipping problem.

A fair reader must realize that the paper had to include statements from U.S. government officials. Demonstrating America’s overwhelming economic advantage over Japan is not quite enough in building an economic case against the bombing. It is also necessary to show that U.S. war planners were *aware* of their overwhelming advantage. Perhaps the planners believed that they had a massive economic disadvantage and thus used the atomic bomb out of desperation. Some quotes from the U.S. war planners were included to show that they were aware—before the atomic bombings—that “the Japs are already licked. We don’t have to land in Japan, we don’t have to do anything more to them” (Leahy, quoted in O’Brien 2019, 320).

This brings us to Adm. William D. Leahy. Bernstein claims, “None of them [U.S. war planners] was seeking to avoid the use of the bomb, and none of them is known to have ever said to Truman, before Hiroshima, don’t use the bomb because there is another way.” This is false.

Like so many historians, Bernstein seems to underestimate the great significance of Leahy in U.S. war planning. It is beyond the scope of this reply to provide a detailed account of Leahy’s opposition to the atomic bombing. Fortunately, Phillips P. O’Brien has written a splendid biography of Leahy with the telling title, *The Second Most Powerful Man in the World*. In that book, O’Brien shows that Leahy was the most important U.S. war planner of the Second World War (2019, 280–81).

In fact, a case can be made that Leahy is the most important military officer in U.S. history.¹

Did Truman know that Leahy opposed the atomic bomb? Truman was not aware of the weapon until very late in the war. On April 25, 1945, Leahy and Vannevar Bush were the two men who gave Truman his first full briefing on the weapon.² According to Truman's own memoirs (1965, 21), Leahy advised Truman at that briefing: "This is the biggest fool thing we have ever done." This briefing proves that Truman knew Leahy opposed the weapon from the very beginning. Furthermore, "it was the first of *many examples* of Leahy trying to sour Truman on the bomb" (O'Brien 2019, 340, emphasis added). Contrary to Bernstein, Truman always knew that the second most powerful man in the world opposed the atomic bomb.

In summary, Bernstein's alleged conceptual problem is no problem at all. By writing so many words on this nonexistent problem, Bernstein only highlights his own conceptual problem—that is, to write a reply with no economic case *for* the atomic bombing of Japan.

The Grand Lesson of the Atomic Bombing of Japan

Bernstein's fatal error is to emphasize politics over economics in the debate over the atomic bombing of Japan. He criticizes what he calls the "economic facts can prove the A-bomb unnecessary" framework. In doing so, he advocates a "political-facts" framework over an "economic-facts" framework. This mindset is dangerous, for it distracts from the central economic lessons of the atomic bombing.

It is not the task of history to defend or condemn. We cannot change the past. Rather, we study history to learn lessons that might allow us to make better decisions in the future. Concerning the atomic bombing, we do not study the event to assign blame. No one alive today is to blame for the bombing; anyone responsible has passed. It is vain for modern commentators to debate who was to blame for the atomic bombing of Japan.

This is the ultimate purpose of studying the atomic bombing: to help ensure that nuclear weapons are never again used against human beings. There are vital lessons to be learned from the atomic bombing of Japan. Many mistakes were made on all sides in the years before Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is crucial to study these mistakes so that they are not repeated in the future. To be sure, the governments of Japan, the U.S., and Britain all made political mistakes in the months just before the

1. Leahy was the first five-star military officer in U.S. history. O'Brien explains, "[Leahy] would remain the highest-ranking military officer in American history until George Washington was posthumously given his sixth star in 1976" (2019, 313).

2. A few hours before this meeting, Henry Stimson told Truman that the U.S. government had developed "the most terrible weapon ever known in human history" (quoted in Alperovitz 1995, 131–32). But Stimson did not reveal that the weapon was an atomic bomb. Leahy and Bush gave Truman the full briefing (O'Brien 2019, 340n).

bombing. Still, these *political* mistakes could occur only because the U.S., British, and Japanese governments made more fundamental *economic* mistakes long before August 1945. When studying the atomic bombing, it is essential to place priority on the economic mistakes rather than political mistakes.

Although they did not know of nuclear weapons in the nineteenth century, the English Manchester School and the French Laissez-Faire School gave humankind the key to preventing nuclear war. Specifically, they taught humanity that free trade between nations is the key to lasting world peace. In England, Richard Cobden and John Bright advised, “Free trade is the surest way to peace” (Cobden, quoted in Lambert 1915, 6). In France, Frédéric Bastiat warned that “barriers create isolation, isolation gives rise to hatred, hatred to war, war to invasion” ([1845] 2007, 296). In short, free trade is the economic policy of peace, while protectionism is the economic policy of war (Mises [1944] 2011, 317–20).

No doubt, the Japanese government’s delayed surrender was an unforgivable political mistake (Bix 2000, 487). Despite its political mistakes in 1945, however, the Japanese government’s most fundamental error was economic. The Japanese government under Emperor Meiji (who reigned 1867–1912) had formed a partnership with the U.S. and Britain (Kotkin 2014, 18). The U.S., Britain, and Japan were allies in the First World War, and Japan emerged as a member of the Council of Ten at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (MacMillan 2001, 53). Regrettably, the Japanese government turned its back on the Meiji tradition of cooperation with the U.S. and Britain after Hirohito became emperor in 1926.³ In the early years of Hirohito’s reign, Japan went over to autarky—the economic policy of self-sufficiency. This was Japan’s greatest mistake, and it was an economic mistake.

Imagine if the Japanese government under Hirohito had not gone over to autarky in the 1930s. Japan would not have had a war with the U.S. and there would have been no atomic bombing. Japan would not have had a war with China, and Mao Zedong’s Chinese Communist Party would not have filled the power vacuum that Japan had created in China. The Korean War and Vietnam War would not have occurred. Japan was the world’s second-largest economy just four decades after the atomic bombing. If Hirohito’s Japanese government had not embraced autarky, Japan would not have been destroyed and the postwar Japanese miracle would have occurred even earlier.

Did Japan’s enemies embrace free trade? As noted in the original paper, the U.S. enforced the Open Door policy on China after 1899 (Overy 2022, 41). The U.S. Open Door was not a free trade policy; it was a forced trade policy.⁴ As Cobden declared in 1836, “Affairs of trade, like matters of conscience, change their very

3. It is a myth that Hirohito was a passive puppet who played no role in the war. Herbert P. Bix writes that “Hirohito had to furnish an account exculpating his actions as the sovereign head of the Japanese state over the previous twenty years. . . . The top American officials at General Headquarters (GHQ) were already among the emperor’s greatest protectors and mythologizers” (2000, 2–3).

4. As Adam Tooze observes, “The Open Door was not an appeal for free trade” (2014, 15).

nature if touched by the hand of violence. For as faith, if forced, would no longer be religion, but hypocrisy, so commerce becomes robbery if coerced by warlike armaments” ([1836] 1903, 246). Those who pushed the Open Door policy on China got the exact opposite of what they wanted—a closed door enforced by Mao’s communist government. Mao’s government in this closed economic system caused the death of some 46 million Chinese (Valentino 2004, 75). The Pacific War and Chinese communism are perhaps history’s greatest lessons on the dangers of forced trade.

Did the U.S., Britain, and France take a protectionist path in the decades before the Second World War? As Paul Bairoch writes, “All the large countries (except the United Kingdom) had very protective trade policies in 1913” (1995, 25). The U.S., Britain, and France made many mistakes at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. But one of their greatest mistakes was to enshrine the international protectionist system that had existed before 1914. While the weighted average tariff on manufactures in continental Europe was 24.6 percent in 1913, it was still 24.9 percent in 1927 (Bairoch 1995, 3).

Then the international protectionist system went into overdrive after 1930. In the U.S., the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of June 17, 1930, levied an average tariff of approximately 60 percent on over twenty thousand goods (Bairoch 1995, 5). Unfortunately, Britain and France followed the U.S. down the road into extreme protectionism:

In June 1930, the United States introduced the Hawley–Smoot Tariff, cutting off the American market from foreign imports; in November 1931, after a long political debate, Britain abandoned liberal trade and imposed a range of tariffs, followed in August 1932 by an Imperial Preference system to give privileged access to empire imports; in France the Kircher tariffs reduced duty on colonial products at the expense of the wider world. The crisis provoked the creation of special trading and currency blocs, for the dollar, for sterling and for the franc. (Overly 2022, 27)

Japan embraced autarky in the 1930s, while the U.S. embraced protectionism. These grave economic mistakes put the two nations on a collision course. Protectionism and autarky led to millions of deaths, and the war closed with the atomic bombing of Japan. The central takeaway of this tragedy is that protectionism and autarky led to the war, and the war led to the atomic bombing.

That brings us to the grand lesson of the atomic bombing. We can do no better than to paraphrase Cobden and Bastiat: Free trade is the surest way to prevent nuclear war; protectionism and autarky create isolation, isolation gives rise to hatred, hatred to war, war to nuclear war. That is the chief lesson that future generations must learn and relearn from the atomic bombing of Japan.

In his defense, Bernstein is not alone in stressing politics over economics in the debate over the atomic bombing of Japan. Sadly, very few commentators grasp the

significance of economics in the debate. However, to emphasize politics over economics in the nuclear debate is a lethal error. And that was the purpose of the original paper—to push economics into the forefront of the debate over nuclear weapons. As the great Richard Cobden might say if he were alive today, the prevention of nuclear war depends more on the maintenance of free trade and the diffusion of economic education than on the labors of politicians.⁵

References

- Alperovitz, Gar. 1995. *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb: And the Architecture of an American Myth*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Bastiat, Frédéric. (1847) 2007. “Economic Sophisms—First Series.” In *The Bastiat Collection*, vol. 1, chap. 6, 169–304. Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute.
- Bairoch, Paul. 1995. *Economics and World History: Myths and Paradoxes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bernstein, Barton J. 1986. A Postwar Myth: 500,000 U.S. Lives Saved. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 42 (6): 38–40.
- . 1999. Reconsidering Truman’s Claim of “Half a Million American Lives” Saved by the Atomic Bomb: The Construction and Deconstruction of a Myth. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22 (1): 54–95.
- Bix, Herbert P. 2000. *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Cobden, Richard. 1903. *The Political Writings of Richard Cobden*. Vol. 1. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- . 1908a. Finance I, Manchester, January 27, 1848. In *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy*. Vol. 1, *Free Trade and Finance*, 233–41. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- . 1908b. Foreign Policy IV, House of Commons, June 28, 1850. In *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy*. Vol. 2, *War, Peace, and Reform*, 416–24. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Ellis, John. 1993. *World War II, A Statistical Survey: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants*. New York: Facts on File.
- Hanson, Victor D. 2017. *The Second World Wars: How the First Global Conflict Was Fought and Won*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kotkin, Stephen. 2014. *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Lambert, Henri. 1915. *The Ethics of International Trade*. London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press.
- MacMillan, Margaret. 2001. *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*. New York: Random House.

5. The original passage from Cobden’s 1850 speech reads: “The progress of freedom depends more upon the maintenance of peace, the spread of trade, and the diffusion of education, than upon the labors of cabinets and foreign offices” (Cobden [1836] 1908b, 423).

- Miles, Rufus E. 1985. Hiroshima: The Strange Myth of Half a Million American Lives Saved. *International Security* 10 (2): 121–40.
- Miller, Edward S. 2007. *Bankrupting the Enemy: The U.S. Financial Siege of Japan before Pearl Harbor*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press.
- Mises, Ludwig von. (1919) 2006. *Nation, State, and Economy: Contributions to the Politics and History of Our Time*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- . (1944) 2011. *Omnipotent Government: The Rise of the Total State and Total War*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- O'Brien, Phillips P. 2019. *The Second Most Powerful Man in the World: The Life of Admiral William D. Leahy, Roosevelt's Chief of Staff*. New York: Dutton.
- Overy, Richard J. 2022. *Blood and Ruins: The Great Imperial War, 1931–1945*. New York: Viking.
- Tooze, Adam. 2014. *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916–1931*. New York: Viking.
- Truman, Harry S. 1965. *Memoirs*. Vol. 1, *Year of Decisions*. New York: Signet Books.
- Valentino, Benjamin A. 2004. *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

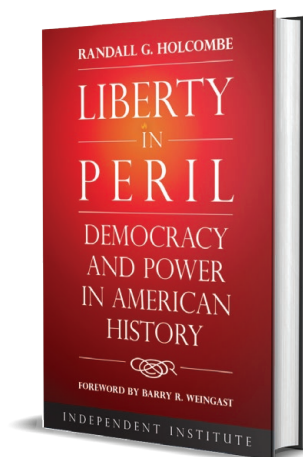
“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

SUBSCRIBE

The Independent Review is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

