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Performative Violence and the Spectacular Debut of the Atomic Bomb

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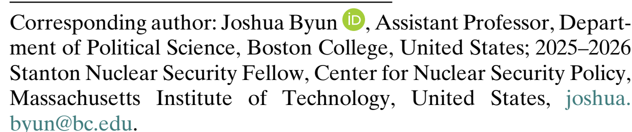
The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki reshaped international politics and the field of International Relations. But one question—“How should the atomic bomb be used?”—has been largely overlooked in political science. This article recovers American deliberations on alternative nuclear use options before August 1945, including the “noncombat demonstration,” targeting military installations, giving advance warning, and striking more symbolically valuable cities. We develop theoretical insights on the value of staging violent spectacles and the emotive power of visible destruction. We then use a wide range of sources to show that U.S. leaders selected an ostentatiously lethal means of atomic debut due to concerns about conventional military inferiority vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, the desire to instill a widespread view of the bomb’s revolutionary character, and the imperative of shaping the postwar international order. This study advances our understanding of the post-1945 international order and the performative dimensions of political violence.

The Harry S. Truman administration’s decision to use atomic bombs against Japan was one of the most significant political events of the modern era. In a 1999 survey that asked “prominent reporters, editors, broadcasters, photographers, and cartoonists” in the United States to rank the top 100 newsworthy stories of the twentieth century, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki came in first, outranking competitors such as the Moon landing, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Holocaust (quoted in Walker 2005, 311). The bomb’s “debut” in 1945 is also one among a handful of events—like the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the birth of the post-Napoleonic international order in 1815 (e.g., Cederman, Warren, and Sornette 2011; Osiander 2001)—that profoundly shaped both the study of International Relations (IR) and the international system.

Most scholarship on this event focuses on the ethics of using the bomb, which audience it was addressing (i.e., Japan vs. the Soviet Union), and its impact on Japan’s decision to surrender. Less commonly addressed, however, is *how* the atomic bomb was used for the first time in history. The option of launching a surprise, lethal attack on heavily populated cities such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki was only one of several that U.S. leaders considered. Other contenders included: (1) arranging a “striking but harmless demonstration” (i.e., noncombat demonstration) in the presence of foreign observers (Hewlett and Anderson 1962, 358); (2) using the bomb “against straight military targets,” such as naval bases (May 29, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 17); (3) providing “preliminary warning… two or three days in advance” to reduce civilian deaths (June 27, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 29); and (4) destroying cities with more symbolic value. This article revisits high-level deliberations about alternative methods of debuting the atomic bomb and assesses why American leaders were drawn to the “ultralethal” option. While some historians have noted these debates, IR scholars have largely overlooked them. We adapt insights on performative violence, originally developed by scholars like the late Lee Ann Fujii to understand civil conflicts, and combine them with insights from scholarship on the dramaturgical aspects of international politics and theories of visual destruction to make sense of the August 1945 decision.

Our core argument is that U.S. leaders orchestrated a spectacularly violent display of a new form of weaponry because they believed this would help them reshape widespread perceptions of relative power, thereby enhancing their country’s ability to shape the postwar international order. Despite a looming victory, many American officials in the final years of World War II anticipated long-term conventional military inferiority vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and insufficient influence over the postwar international system. Moreover, while top U.S. leaders believed in the atomic bomb’s “revolutionary” nature, they were not confident that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outsiders would understand its potency. They believed that only a spectacularly lethal debut of atomic weaponry would favorably alter global perceptions of the bomb and the balance of world power. Concerns that went beyond the issue of Japanese surrender and the Soviet Union's expected reactions thus critically shaped the way in which the atomic bomb made its first appearance to the world. Accordingly, U.S. policymakers rejected the idea of a noncombat demonstration, giving advance warning, and targeting alternative targets in Japan with an eye toward ensuring an especially clear, visible, and deadly atomic debut. Hiroshima, in particular, emerged as the favorite target because it was relatively undamaged by conventional bombing and offered a "fair background" to showcase the bomb's power to destroy human life and physical structures on a mass scale (June 6, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 21).

This article makes two main contributions. First, our synthesis of insights on performative violence underscores the common thread linking instantiations of spectacular violence in multiple realms of politics. The ideas we take cue from, such as "putting violence on display," "staging," and "extralethal" spectacles, were initially developed by scholars to explain seemingly gratuitous acts of violence in domestic or colonial settings (e.g., Fujii 2021; MacDonald 2023). We show that an analogous logic offers explanatory purchase for a pivotal episode in the history of the international system. Across different political contexts, gratuitous violence that destroys human bodies and landscapes can "brin[g] to life ideas about how the world should be, and more specifically, how it should be ordered" (Fujii 2021, 2). American policymakers meticulously planned a spectacularly violent debut of the atomic bomb to leave an indelible mark on how the international community understands a new class of weaponry. Showing how the performative logic operated in this case underscores its promise as a larger research agenda that crosses traditional disciplinary and subfield boundaries.

Moreover, our theoretical framework goes beyond existing scholarship in ways that can shed light on various aspects of performative violence. We develop additional insights on the mechanics of spectacles—that is, how political actors meticulously curate the scenery of "ultralethal" performances. We also offer richer logics on how decision-makers contemplating violent spectacles navigate the risk of backlash, as well as the political conditions that make such spectacles more likely. Specified as such, the framework puts into proper perspective several facets of the decision-making process in 1945 that had, by and large, escaped sustained scrutiny in past scholarship. These include the painstaking attention U.S. officials paid to the natural and built environment that would provide the backdrop for the atomic bomb's first use, as well as their effort to insulate cities like Hiroshima from conventional destruction with an eye toward ensuring an unspoiled "stage space" for the bomb's grand appearance. Our performative lens thus helps make better sense of well-known facts about the atomic bombing decision and identifies previously underappreciated "excess empirical content"; this underscores the promise of such approaches as a progressive research program (Lakatos 1970, 118).

Second, for IR scholarship, our theoretically grounded reappraisal of the atomic bomb's debut provides a fresh perspective on the origins of the post-1945 international order. G. John Ikenberry's influential interpretation of this period highlights strategic restraint: enjoying a "huge disparity of power" vis-à-vis other states at the end of World War II, the United States bounded itself within postwar international institutions, limiting its exercise of power in the short term but locking in its preponderant position over the long term (Ikenberry 2001, 167). Our analysis of the atomic bomb's debut provides a more complete —and decidedly less congratulatory—interpretation of the 1945 "ordering moment." Primary documents show that most American leaders were unsure of their country's future power preponderance prior to August 1945. They worried about America's postwar influence, given its deficit in conventional military power vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. In this setting, U.S. leaders believed that atomic weapons could help revise global perceptions of American power and enable Washington to drive the postwar international order, but only if these weapons were given a properly spectacular debut.

To an extent seldom recognized, then, a key element in the liberal international order's foundation was a carefully crafted display of shockingly lethal violence. Only after clarifying the atomic bomb's astounding power to the world could the United States confidently embrace restraint via postwar institutions. This new interpretation pushes scholars to revisit the illiberal conditions that undergirded the "liberal" ordering moment of 1945. It also provides a distinct perspective on the coercive power of nuclear weapons, a subject of renewed debate in IR (e.g., Debs 2025; Sechser and Fuhrmann 2017). The spectacle created by the atomic bomb's debut not only contributed to the birth of the postwar international order but also imbued nuclear weapons with enduring imagery and connotations that shaped their subsequent role in coercive diplomacy.

THE ATOMIC BOMBINGS OF 1945 IN IR AND HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Within IR scholarship, scholars working with the bargaining model of war have offered brief interpretations of the causes of the 1945 atomic bombing decisions. In this framework, fighting during war reveals information about adversaries' relative power or resolve (Fearon 1995). Dan Reiter (2003, 31) thus observes that heavy U.S. losses in earlier fights over the Pacific islands had revealed Japan's resolve, which in turn "strengthened the case for dropping the atomic bomb as a means of making…an invasion [of the Japanese home islands] unnecessary." Alex Weisiger (2016, 352), on the other hand, points to the atomic bomb as a rare example of a

hidden technological innovation during war that gives its possessor "new high-salience private information." An early treatment by Bernard Brodie (1953, 288) anticipated this argument, observing that one reason for dramatically revealing a new weapon is "emphasizing [the possessor's] technological leadership in the tools of war [.]" In this vein, he cited the Hiroshima–Nagasaki bombings as an example of military "demonstration." Other scholars have produced detailed studies of the consequences of the atomic bombing decisions. The most important are Robert Pape (1993) and Ward Wilson (2007), who both conclude that the bombings were likely not decisive in coercing Japan to surrender. No previous IR study, to the best of our knowledge, has focused on explaining why American leaders chose to disclose the atomic bomb in the specific manner that they did.

It is worth noting that, beyond the handful of studies that have directly addressed the event, the atomic bombings of Japan have shaped the IR discipline in more subtle ways. Brodie observed 6 months after the bombings that nuclear weapons had fundamentally upended military strategy and the role of force in international politics. Specifically, he argued that states with nuclear weapons may now be able to relax much more about the prospects of war and aggression. "Even if the Soviet leaders should at some future date feel strongly about the need for further Russian expansion," he pointed out, "*Japanese experience at Hiroshima and Nagasaki could hardly fail to exercise on them a restraining or cautioning influence*" (Brodie 1946, 129, emphasis added). Such arguments foreshadowed the "nuclear revolution" thesis that has become hugely influential in contemporary IR scholarship (Jervis 1989). More broadly, as Gordin and Ikenberry (2020, 4–5) observe, "the image of the nuclear devastation of two Japanese cities" has always lingered in the background for arguments that stress the revolutionary consequences of nuclear weapons. Since these "remain the only evidence of what a detonation will do to a city and its inhabitants, any threat or invocation of using nuclear weapons is necessarily a legacy of Hiroshima." In other words, the atomic bombings of 1945 stand among the truly rare events in international history that have had a formative impact on how scholars and practitioners alike think about international politics.

Historians, meanwhile, have written extensively on the 1945 atomic bombings and have fiercely debated various aspects of the decision. One axis of debate involves the intended *audience* of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. A "traditionalist" school has argued that fears of the Soviet Union played virtually no role in the Truman administration's choices. American leaders used the atomic bomb to force Japan's prompt surrender (e.g., Allen and Polmar 1995; Maddox 1995; Miscamble 2011). A "revisionist" school has highlighted the importance of altering the Soviet Union's calculations and behavior (Alperovitz 1965; 1995; Takaki 1995; Wainstock 1996). A more recent "middle-ground" position acknowledges both: inducing Japanese surrender was important, but the Soviet factor also mattered.[1] Barton Bernstein, in particular, argues that while ending the Pacific War quickly was the primary motive for using the atomic bomb, the prospect of "secur[ing] concessions from the Soviets" was a key "bonus" that posed a "deterrent to any reconsideration" of the bomb's use (Bernstein 1975, 60). Put differently, "[h]ad the use of the bomb threatened to impair, rather than advance, American aims for the postwar peace" vis-à-vis the Soviets, U.S. leaders "would have been likely to reassess their assumptions and perhaps to choose other alternatives" (24). Tsuyoshi Hasegawa (2005) goes a step further, arguing that while U.S. leaders used the bomb to hasten Japan's surrender, they rushed the end of the war largely *because* they wanted to keep the Soviets from entering the postwar geopolitical competition from a stronger position.

In the course of waging this debate, some historians have examined U.S. deliberations on *how* to use the atomic bomb in considerable detail. Most thorough here is Bernstein, who observes in his discussion of "so-called alternatives" that the noncombat demonstration, "normally judged…in connection with the idea of an advance warning about the bomb[,]" was unique among various plausible options in receiving serious attention among high-level policymakers before August 1945 (1995, 227, 235–7; see also Bernstein 1975, 49–59). In a different work, Bernstein (1991) examines early proposals to use nuclear weapons in "tactical" applications—that is, more exclusively military targets. Other important historians like Gar Alperovitz (1995, esp. 163–4), Sean Malloy (2008; 2007), and Martin Sherwin (1975) also offer richly documented narratives on top-level conversations about alternative debut scenarios. Richard Rhodes neatly summarizes the widely held view among specialists when writing that "a purely technical demonstration" of the bomb was rejected in favor of a massively lethal attack both to "shock [the Japanese] into surrender" and "to put the Russians on notice…to let the world know what was coming"—a conclusion we agree with but go beyond (1986, 697; see also Jones 2010, 1). Other works have examined the "target committee" discussions of April–May 1945 about which cities represented the most appealing targets (e.g., Gordin 2005, 44–6; Malloy 2008, 105–6), to which our discussion is also indebted. Yet the historiographical conversation about targeting has focused on the impact that the "civilian" or "military" nature of different cities had on the thinking of top decision-makers.[2]

Building on the groundwork established by historians, we bring the atomic bombing decisions into the

[1] "Middle-ground" advocates disagree on an array of important questions (see review by Walker 2005). However, they broadly agree that "impressing the Soviets" was, at minimum, "an added incentive" that increased the attractiveness of using the bomb (Walker 2016, 94).
[2] One scholar has suggested that Truman misunderstood the civilian nature of the target cities (Wellerstein 2020). See Bernstein (1998, 557–9) and McKinney, Sagan, and Weiner (2020, 158–9) on why this is extremely unlikely.

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fold of a theoretical framework that reinterprets known findings and highlights overlooked details. We interpret the rejection of alternative use scenarios through a performative logic that highlights the "staging" of grotesque violence. The logic imparts new meaning to certain aspects of the decision-making process that historical scholarship has only tangentially dealt with or, in most cases, has not discussed at all. In particular, beyond the "civilian" or "military" nature of cities, we highlight the meticulous attention U.S. policymakers devoted to the *scenography* of the atomic debut. This led them to rate cities according to their populational and industrial attributes as well as the "contour of the terrain" in surrounding areas (Parsons letter, April 6, 1945, MEDC 1942–1946, Batch 1, scans 501–600). These features, we show, were important considerations for creating a dramatically lethal spectacle that would showcase the atomic bomb's destructive power to the world. We also highlight striking evidence that the same performative concerns led top American decision-makers not only to select Hiroshima as a favorite target because it had been largely "untouched" from prior destruction, but also to actively forbid military commanders from hitting it with conventional munitions in the lead-up to the atomic bomb's grand debut. Insofar as historians were aware of these fine-grained orchestrations, they had only drawn limited inferences from them due to the lack of a theoretical framework that underscores their broader meaning.[3]

Our interpretation also complicates the standard debate between traditionalist and revisionist historians about the relative importance of Japanese and Soviet audiences. We present evidence that the strategic audiences U.S. policymakers had in mind when deliberating the first use of atomic weaponry were likely not only in Tokyo and Moscow but also in many other capitals and even foreign publics. While our analysis hews closer to revisionist interpretations than traditionalist ones in acknowledging the weight of the Soviet factor, our central argument is best described as a "middle ground plus" position. As one official put it, the twin considerations were the atomic bomb's effects on the ongoing war and "on our strength and the stability of the postwar world" (Oppenheimer, quoted in Polenberg 2002, 34). Alongside the imperative of inducing Japanese surrender, the desire to alter perceptions of American power in the broader international system played a key role in shaping how the atomic bomb was first revealed to the world.

THE LOGIC OF VIOLENT DISPLAY DURING WAR

We argue that the Truman administration approached the first use of the atomic bomb not merely as another act of war but as the *performative debut of a revolutionary military innovation.* Expanding on logics of violent spectacles in colonial and domestic conflict settings, we argue that interstate wars can also feature ultralethal spectacles designed to trigger powerful emotional reactions and change widespread perceptions about power and order. We tailor these ideas to the context of groundbreaking military innovations, of which atomic weaponry is one example, while adding theoretical depth and specificity to previous arguments.

Performance, Violence, and War

A "performance," as defined by Richard Bauman, is "an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience" (quoted in Fujii 2013, 413). Numerous scholars have analyzed human behavior through the lens of performance. Sociologist Erving Goffman highlighted the central role that "impression management" plays in many types of social actions, which is what imbues them with a performative character. This involves an actor "influencing the definition of the situation" and creating for audiences "the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his [or her] own plans" (1959, 3–4, bracketed language ours).[4] IR scholars have also conceptualized some facets of international life as performative acts. Weber (1998), Campbell (1992), and Laffey (2000), for example, analyze state sovereignty itself as a kind of political performance, whereas Adler and Pouliot (2011) see diplomats as engaging in performance practices. Also noteworthy are recent works that analyze the performative aspects of summit diplomacy (e.g., Ku 2025; Naylor 2025; Nair 2019).

Why might the public "performance" of extreme violence be politically useful? Such acts create a "spectacle," which Bakogianni (2015, 4–5) defines as a high-profile performance "controlled by a producer…seek[ing] to elicit particular responses from their audience" via a "multi-sensory experience." Scholars of colonialism, civil war, and racist violence in the American South have addressed the role of such violent spectacles. Kim Wagner (2016, 195, 205), for example, describes how Britain's East India Company staged mass executions by cannon as a "performance of colonial power pure and simple" after the Sepoy uprising of 1857. These "were never intended solely, or even primarily, for the attendant sepoys, but…were intended for the entire Indian population." More generally, Paul MacDonald (2023, 746) has argued that colonial states governing fragile imperial hierarchies were often prone to "insecurity, paranoia, and a tendency to respond to challenges with performative violence." White supremacists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century U.S. South organized "spectacle lynchings" with an analogous purpose (e.g., Wood 2011). The Islamic State and Mexican drug cartels have likewise used public displays of

[3] Historian Alex Wellerstein notes in a 2014 blog post that key cities were put on a list of targets "reserved" from conventional bombing, but does not dwell on its significance. See "The Kyoto Misconception," August 8, 2014, *Restricted Data: A Nuclear History Blog*, https://blog.nuclearsecrecy.com/2014/08/08/kyoto-misconception/.

[4] See also Alexander, Giesen, and Mast (2006).

brutality to dramatize their power and enforce local dominance (e.g., Euben 2017; Friis 2018; Lantz 2016).[5]

The late political scientist Lee Ann Fujii's work on "extralethal" spectacles and the communicative power of putting "violence on display" helps pinpoint the common thread in these works: power and order.[6] "Display makes the imagined 'real,'" she argued, "by giving it materiality, visibility, and three-dimensional form" (Fujii 2021, 2). Violent displays are linked to political orders insofar as they help actors support arguments about "who should have power and who should be included and on what basis people should claim belonging" in a political hierarchy (2). Fujii used this insight to explain why some acts of violence in civil conflicts—for example, rape and mutilation during civil war, lynchings of African Americans in the twentieth-century American South, tend to be so ostentatiously brutal and public, that is, "extralethal."[7]

Staging Violence: Choosing the Message

Expanding on Fujii's arguments in particular, we disaggregate the process that leads to the staging of violent spectacles into two basic steps. The first step involves identifying a message, given that such violence is—like other performative acts—a "mode of communication" (Fujii 2013, 413). As Fujii writes, by putting violence on display, political actors "are telling the world '*who they are*' and by extension, *who everyone else is not*" (19, emphasis added). The content of the message may vary depending on context. In Roxanne Euben's (2017, 1007) account, the goal of ISIS's public beheading videos was to communicate that they were a "legitimate, invincible sovereign." Ahsan Butt (2019, 270) argues that the George W. Bush administration sought to "convey a message of unbridled hegemony" by attacking Iraq in 2003. Adapting these insights, we argue that an ostentatious display of a new and frighteningly destructive type of weaponry can help its user stake out a claim to greater power and influence in international politics.

Staging Violence: Setting the Scene

The second step in designing an ultralethal spectacle involves the "how," or the mechanics by which a given message will be conveyed. As Emanuel Adler argues, a "compelling performance depends not only on whether the knowledge represented is valid"; just as important are "gaining control over the means of symbolic presentation" and "imposing one's own narrative on others" over potentially competing narratives (2010, 204). And scholars of spectacular violence have made a compelling case that few performative devices are as symbolically gripping or imposing as scenes of visible death and destruction. Focusing on human bodies, Fujii (2021, 2) remarks that the communicative value of ostentatious violence comes from its ability to make the abstract real. If not for "bodies moving and acting in particular ways"—for example, mutilated, immolated, or otherwise transgressed in plain view—violent "displays would…[not] have the power to draw in new audiences over time and place." In a similar vein, philosopher Adriana Cavarero observes that war and modern weaponry tear at the "constitutive vulnerability" of the human condition: "Ground-up bodies, limbs torn apart, carnage, and butchery are all part of [the] habitual theater" of war (Cavarero 2009, 8, 12). Such scenes can imbue violence with a dramatic, transfixing quality. As such, drawing on feminist theories of the body, Lauren Wilcox (2015) argues that violence to human bodies has productive effects for the identities of those involved and for understanding a "political world, in and through their relations with other bodies" (167).

We supplement this work on bodies with additional insights about the impact of violent wartime displays on the built environment and natural landscape. Scholars like Jairus Grove (2019, 41) have observed that war and war preparation can have "terraforming" effects, altering the very geological features of the planet.[8] Apart from war's unintended geological ramifications, other scholars note the value of *intentionally* altering the physical environment through violence. Butt notes that the spectacular destruction of urban terrain was one reason why invading Iraq, in addition to Afghanistan, was attractive to U.S. policymakers after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was arguing as early as September 13, 2001 that Afghanistan's underdeveloped infrastructure would not allow for "the kind of costly damage that could cause terrorist-supporting regimes around the world to rethink their policies" (quoted in Butt 2019, 271). By contrast, the presence of "more impressive physical targets" made Iraq a better setting in which to "demonstrate to the world the extent of [American] power and will to use it" (272).

What enables the success of performances that visibly violate human bodies and the surrounding environment? We highlight the importance of *staging*, a concept in scenography (i.e., the art of crafting stage environments) that "refers to how the director physically arranges bodies, objects, lights, sound, and set pieces to create a particular stage picture" or "stage space" (Howard 2002, xix). Much like theater directors,

[5] Also note studies that remark on the importance of spectacles and images in the contemporary digital era, such as Williams (2018) and Bleiker (2018).

[6] For a classic work that anticipated some of Fujii's intuitions, see Foucault (1977).

[7] Fujii (2013, 410) more specifically defined extralethal violence as "face-to-face acts of violence that transgress shared norms about the proper treatment of persons and bodies." To avoid confusion, we use the term "ultralethal violence" to describe spectacularly lethal displays during interstate war, which often involves graphic destruction to the built environment and human bodies. Understood as such, ultralethal violence using nuclear weapons is also distinct from the idea of "overkill," a label used by some to describe U.S. nuclear strategy in the early Cold War (Rosenberg 1983).

[8] See also Alexis-Martin et al. (2021) on the environmental and ecological alterations produced by nuclear tests.

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political actors often deliberately select and compose scenes to create spectacles—that is, to amplify the impact of their extralethal performances and the message they hope to convey.[9] Fujii (2021, 3–4) notes that staging extralethal displays in civil conflicts requires heeding the "look and feel" of a violent event. Without effective staging, audiences may disagree about the performance's meaning or even fail to recognize it as an act of communication with a specific message. Spectacles must do more than just generate harm. Performances work in large part because of their emotive power—for example, fear, awe, or horror. Performing violence thus has "both strategic *and* expressive value"; indeed, it is this emotive aspect that might "be key to explaining certain *outcomes* of violence, such as displays that feature more force than is necessary" at first glance (Fujii 2021, 7, emphasis in original).

Tending to the Problem of Backlash

Ultralethal public displays are not without risks. Following Goffman (1959), the key to successful "impression management" in performative acts is not simply to elicit the biggest reaction. Rather, it is to create the right *kind* of impression that could lead others to accommodate one's goals. Ostentatious violence carries inherent risks of alienation and revulsion among observers. Integrating this problem of audience backlash adds important nuance to how we think about performative displays of violence in interstate war and other settings.

Most studies of performative violence do not deeply engage with the problem of backlash. Fujii, for one, summarizes her own argument as stating that political actors use violent displays to "broadcast power, authority, sovereignty, and other political claims *in the most graphic terms possible* (2021, 5, emphasis in original). While she acknowledges that extralethal performances "might be counterproductive," she devotes the bulk of her theoretical and empirical discussion to the communicative benefits of violent displays (4). Other works have similarly hinted at the problem of backlash while stopping short of explicitly theorizing it. Wagner (2016, 215), for example, describes how the memory of grotesque public executions in colonial India "caused an outcry" in British public opinion many decades later because it became a symbol of the "excess of colonialism" that "belied the ideals of the civilizing mission in…a spectacular manner." Amy Wood (2011, 199) notes that graphic photographs of Southern lynching victims circulated by their opponents induced "shock and revulsion" among viewers, contributing to political mobilization against the perpetrators.

We argue that states contemplating violent spectacles during war should account for the risk of unduly repulsing their audiences and thereby defeating the purpose of the performance. How might they deal with this problem? One response might be to conceal or suppress images of grotesque death and suffering that could alienate audiences, directing observers' attention to other, less upsetting but nonetheless awe-inspiring images of destruction (e.g., Slattery and Doremus 2012). Put differently, after deliberately bringing violence to the "frontstage" of international politics in a spectacular way, states may try to relegate some of their fallout to the "backstage" as they engage in continued impression management (Carson 2018). Another response might be to *tailor* the performance itself. In this scenario, the state still orchestrates a highly visible and lethal spectacle but channels this violence to avoid at least some of the most damaging forms of backlash. Leaders may, for instance, impose restraints on the kinds of victims that will be used to showcase ultralethal violence. As Ron Hassner (2009, 60) observes regarding religious spaces in war, counterinsurgents often "hesitate before attacking, entering, or damaging a site sacred to a local community" for fear of sowing irreversible hostility among those they ultimately seek to govern. A similar logic may hold for a state whose aim is not only to broadcast its power but also to inspire deference from others in the *international* political order. It may channel its ultralethal display away from spaces known to hold special sentimental value to relevant audiences. We return to this issue when discussing which Japanese cities were targeted with—and spared from—the violent debut of the atomic bomb in 1945.

When to Stage Spectacular Violence?

Given their potential benefits as well as risks, under what conditions are states likely to perform ultralethal spectacles during interstate war? We highlight two. One derives from the general effect of spectacles on perceptions of power and political order. The second emerges from the problem of uncertainty inherent to military innovations.

Taking a cue from earlier scholarship, we argue that spectacles of violence will be especially attractive when a state perceives an acute need to redress a relative power deficit while trying to exploit an opportunity to shape a new political order. As Jonathan Renshon (2016, 526) points out in the context of international status, shifts in widespread perceptions of an actor's relative position may lag because "[e]vents… might be interpreted differently by different observers." A revelatory event "must change all (or the vast majority) of observers' beliefs in the same way" to trigger change. The vividness of an event or experience, in short, affects the extent to which it helps strengthen the performer's claim to power and influence. States perceiving relative weakness may thus seek to create spectacles of violence when facing an "ordering moment"—that is, times "when the rules and institutions of the international order are on the table for negotiation and change" (Ikenberry 2011, 12). Such opportunities often arise at the conclusion of a major war (Ikenberry 2001). In short, the combination of relative power concerns and a perceived window of

[9] On the utility of the theater analogy in international politics, see Carson (2018, chap. 2).

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opportunity to shape the emerging political order should make ultralethal displays attractive.

A second condition is specific to the empirical context we address: military innovations. Most new military technologies and tactics trigger debates about the innovation's broader significance. Before their debut on the battlefield, political and military leaders often fiercely disagreed on the importance of innovations like the blitzkrieg or air power (e.g., Kier 1997; Mearsheimer 1988; Pape 1996). Even after an innovation's first use, historians and practitioners continue to debate its military consequences and political effects (Knox and Murray 2001). In short, new methods of war carry a fundamental problem of uncertainty, both for the governments developing them and especially for outside observers. When it comes to an especially destructive innovation, spectacles featuring ostentatious lethality can help showcase its properties and advantages. This, in turn, can affect the innovating state's perceived power to observers across the international system.[10] By extension, actors who do not believe that a given innovation's lethality is distinctive are unlikely to treat it as a promising tool of violent spectacle even when they are looking for ways to alter widespread perceptions of their relative power.[11]

Observable Implications for the Debut of the Atomic Bomb in 1945

We apply this theoretical framework to illuminate the decision-making process that led to the atomic bomb's lethal debut in August 1945. Our arguments about performative violence generate expectations about the conditions that make a spectacularly violent atomic debut attractive, the concerns and goals that policymakers have in mind when weighing alternative debut options, and the details of how and where to perform this act of violence—that is, "staging." They thus offer theoretical guideposts for empirical analysis and bring to the fore certain aspects of the August 1945 atomic bombings that have been overlooked in past scholarship.

First, our framework has implications for the conditions that drew U.S. decision-makers to an ultralethal atomic spectacle. The risks of backlash suggest that states should normally shy away from such displays. However, when (1) concerns about relative power deficits during a political ordering moment and (2) uncertainty about a military innovation's significance are especially acute, leaders will be tempted to put on ultralethal performances. We therefore expect U.S. policymakers in the leadup to Hiroshima to harbor serious fears about America's deficiency in relative power, especially with respect to likely postwar rivals like the Soviet Union. Leaders should also express related concerns about shaping the postwar order, framing their decisions as not merely addressing the needs of the immediate war but also considering their country's long-term position and influence in the broader international system. They should also deliberate about the distinctiveness and significance of the atomic bomb and, if convinced of its revolutionary character, be wary of the possibility that its qualities will remain unknown to outside observers. In 1985, Robert Jervis wrote that "[i]f everyone denied the importance of the change introduced by nuclear weapons, then indeed there would be more continuity between the current situation and prenuclear ones" (Jervis 1985, 40). We should observe U.S. leaders fearing precisely this possibility and making significant choices about the method of atomic debut to discourage it.

Our theoretical claims also have implications for the "reason-giving" of leaders as they weigh alternative methods of debuting the atomic bomb. Individuals advocating ultralethal debut options should note the value of spectacular violence for shaping outside perceptions and the importance of visible destruction. They should highlight the strategic importance of a debut that clarifies the atomic bomb's revolutionary capacity to destroy humans and material environments at high speed. Officials favoring more lethal options should further cite the impact of the atomic debut on the postwar international order. The intended impression should target not just the immediate enemy (i.e., Japan) but also wider international audiences. Echoing the link between spectacles of violence and power, they should see a highly visible and lethal debut of the atomic bomb as a means to evocatively demonstrate American power.

Other expectations address "staging." Leaders should pay close attention to details on the staging of the atomic bomb's first use, including options for the "stage space" or how different locations may or may not adequately showcase the lethality of the atomic bomb. This will likely make them prioritize targeting densely populated cities rather than strictly military targets. Decision-makers will also see special value in locations that promise the starkest "before-and-after" contrast in damage to human life and the surrounding environment. They should appraise specific features of candidate targets, elevating locations thought to amplify the atomic detonation's lethality. Moreover, as good stage directors do, once an appropriate setting has been selected, policymakers are likely to take proactive measures to safeguard it for the grand debut. Finally, given the centrality of "impression management" for a successful performance, they should display an interest in appropriately tailoring the ultralethal display to mitigate the problem of backlash.[12]

[10] This is especially true when innovations had previously been concealed from most audiences (e.g., Green and Long 2019).

[11] Of course, these actors may still turn to other means of putting violence on display identified in previous scholarship, such as mass killings or cruel and unusual forms of public execution.

[12] Our logic further suggests that the *opponents* of ultralethal displays are more likely to be skeptical of the atomic bomb's revolutionary character. They may also be less attentive to America's future geopolitical weakness and position in the postwar international order. We present evidence for these predictions in the Supplementary Material.

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RESEARCH DESIGN

We now analyze internal deliberations in the United States about the debut of atomic weaponry in August 1945. This is an important case to assess, partly due to its importance for the field of IR. The atomic bombing of Japan is the quintessential rare event in international history. As John Gerring notes, rare events merit intensive analysis in their own right. This "may provide the most compelling evidence [for] general proposition[s]" even if scholars are "forced to rely solely on counterfactual thought-experiments to evaluate causal claims" (Gerring 2004, 351). A second reason to study the case is the richness of the evidentiary material. The robust documentary record on debates over the atomic bomb available today offers charitable grounds for counterfactual analysis. Our single-case research design rests on the counterfactual claim that had key U.S. policymakers not seen the atomic bomb as a revolutionary weapon that could reset widespread views of the global balance of power, they would have seen more value in debut methods other than the massively lethal one used against Japan. Following Jack Levy, such claims become more credible insofar as we find evidence that political decision-makers deliberated alternative choices and then supported one while discounting others for reasons that echo our theoretical logic.[13] We thus take advantage of candid internal debates to lay out the "choice set" considered by American policymakers.[14]

LEADUP TO HIROSHIMA: THE AMERICAN GEOPOLITICAL OUTLOOK IN LATE WORLD WAR II

This section focuses on two important contextual factors that shaped American debates: (1) how U.S. policymakers in late World War II perceived their relative power in the coming postwar order and (2) pre-Hiroshima perceptions of the atomic bomb as a revolutionary innovation.

Postwar International Order and U.S.–Soviet Relative Power

U.S. policymakers at the end of World War II were acutely conscious of the fact that their actions would help "define the terms on which nations would live and relate" in the postwar international order (Wertheim 2020, 78). Washington further believed it would need to hold "unquestioned power" to shape the postwar world (Council on Foreign Relations Economic and Financial Group, October 19, 1940, quoted in Wertheim 2020, 69).

Yet it was the Soviet Union's conventional military capabilities that were playing the decisive role in crushing Nazi power in Europe.[15] Although Soviet successes against the *Wehrmacht* were welcomed in principle, prominent American analysts were warning as early as 1942 that "[a] Russian state from the Urals to the North Sea can be no great improvement over a German state from the North Sea to the Urals" (Spykman 1942, 460). In 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Chief of Staff Admiral William Leahy wrote that given Soviet "resources, manpower, geography, and particularly our ability to project our strength across the ocean," the United States "might be able to successfully defend Britain, but we could not, under existing conditions, defeat Russia" (excerpt from Leahy letter, May 16, 1944, FRUS 1945, doc. 104). Thus, seeing the Soviet Union consolidate control in Eastern Europe, Roosevelt admitted there was "no point to oppose these desires of Stalin" in the region "because he has the power to get them anyhow. So better give them gracefully" (quoted in McAllister 2002, 39). Roosevelt's successor Truman was briefed in mid-1945 that "Russia will emerge from the present conflict as by far the strongest nation in Europe and Asia" that might easily "outrank even the United States in military potential" (Office of Strategic Services 1945). Not surprisingly, Truman's own view was that the Soviet Union presented the United States "with an accomplished fact" of preponderant power—"there is little we can do" (quoted in Marc 1981, 328).

Secretary of War Henry Stimson later recalled that American policymakers were searching for "a badly needed 'equalizer'" in late World War II (Stimson and Bundy 1948, 638). Without it, Stimson told the President in May 1943, the United States would be left "hold [ing] the leg for Stalin to skin the deer" in key global regions at war's end and "not be able to share much of the post-war world with him" (quoted in Malloy 2008, 74). In the language of our theory, American leaders foresaw an ordering moment and yet worried about their country's ability to influence this order, given its deficiency in conventional metrics of military power. Without some kind of "equalizer," Washington would almost certainly not "end the war with an unprecedented lead in military capability."[16]

A New Relationship of Man to the Universe

At the same time, the Manhattan Project was producing a military innovation that could serve as the much needed equalizer. This equalizing potential would become the key message around which the United States would orient its "staging" efforts. Most American officials privy to the new bomb understood it as a "special and unique" development in international politics rather than "simply another powerful

[13] On this "minimal-rewrite of history" criterion, see Levy (2015, 392).

[14] On the importance of primary sources in evaluating counterfactual claims, see Larson (2018, 3).

[15] As Mark Edele (2020) shows, Western observers at the end of World War II widely agreed—as virtually all serious historians do today—that it was the Soviet Union that played the most important role in defeating Nazi Germany.

[16] The quoted phrase is from Ikenberry (2001, 167), who suggests that U.S. leaders were confident in their country's relative power preponderance toward the end of the war.

explosive" (Malloy 2008, 49–50).[17] The atomic bomb "should not be considered simply in terms of military weapons," Stimson observed at a top-level meeting in May 1945. Instead, it represented "a new relationship of man to the universe. This discovery might be compared to the discoveries of the Copernican theory and of the laws of gravity, but far more important than these in its effect on the lives of men…the implications of the project went far beyond the needs of the present war" (May 31, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 18).

While this view was not uniformly held, it did prevail among the most important decision-makers. As early as September 1944, Vannevar Bush and James B. Conant, lead scientist-administrators of the Manhattan Project, were referring to the weapon under development as a "super-super bomb" that would present "a new challenge to the world" by virtue of the fact "that very great devastation could be caused immediately after the outbreak of hostilities to civilian and industrial centers by an enemy prepared with a relatively few such bombs" (September 30, 1944, in Stoff, Fanton, and Williams 1991, 78). This view was further entrenched after the first full-scale test of the device. Lieutenant General Leslie Groves, military supervisor of the Manhattan Project, approvingly relayed to Stimson a report from his deputy, Major General Thomas F. Farrell, who described the explosion in theological terms:

> All seemed to feel that they had been present at the birth of a new age…The effects could well be called unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying. No man-made phenomenon of such tremendous power had ever occurred before.…[It] made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to The Almighty. Words are inadequate tools for the job of acquainting those not present with the physical, mental and psychological effects. It had to be witnessed to be realized. (July 18, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 46)

Routinely receiving such briefs, Truman himself came to see the bomb as a revolutionary contraption. His own words in July 1945 make this attitude clear: "We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world…It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark."[18]

U.S. leaders also believed that their possession of this revolutionary technology could alter the perceived balance of global power and America's postwar influence. Stimson observed to Truman that nuclear weapons could be "used suddenly and effectively… against an unsuspecting nation or group of much greater size and material power" (April 26, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 6B). "[T]he nature and power of the projected weapon" was, therefore, such that it could "have a decisive influence on our relations with other countries" (Truman 1955, 90). "If it explodes," Truman remarked on his way to the Potsdam Conference in July, "I'll certainly have a hammer on those boys (Russia as well as the Japs [sic])" (quoted in Bernstein 1975, 49, fn. 88). According to physicist Leo Szilárd, Secretary of State James Byrnes told him in a private meeting of May 28, 1945 that it was not strictly "necessary to use the bomb against the cities of Japan in order to win the war…Byrnes's view [was] that our possessing and *demonstrating* the bomb would make Russia more manageable in Europe" (quoted in Bernstein 1975, 48, fn. 80, emphasis added).

Yet U.S. leaders also faced a challenge: would other leaders and publics also see the atomic bomb as revolutionary? Stimson hinted at this conundrum in a February 1945 diary entry. Regarding the "S-1 [atomic bomb] and its possible connection with the Russians[,]" his view was that U.S. policymakers should "tread softly and to hold off conferences on the subject until" they could figure out ways to secure "tangible 'fruits of repentance' from the Russians[.]"[19] He elaborated this reasoning two months later: "[E]very prophecy thus far has been fulfilled by the development [of the atomic bomb] and we can see that success is 99% assured, yet only by the *first actual war trial* of the weapon can the actual certainty be fixed" (Summary diary entry, April 6–11, 1945, quoted in Sherwin 2020, 47–9, emphasis added). In June, Stimson told Truman that "[t]here should be no revelation to Russia or anyone else of our work on the S-1 until the first bomb had been successfully laid on Japan" (June 6, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 21). A group of senior scientists involved in the Manhattan Project highlighted the importance of this problem, observing that "the way in which the nuclear weapons, now secretly developed in this country, will first be revealed to the world appears of great, perhaps fateful importance" (June 12, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 22).

HOW TO USE THE BOMB: ALTERNATIVE NUCLEAR USE SCENARIOS

How, then, would the atomic bomb be revealed to the world? In view of the ambitious message American leaders hoped to send, how would they compose the scene and perform the bomb's debut? We now turn to process-related evidence about different first use options. These are summarized in Table 1. Below we review U.S. policymakers' assessment of these options, highlighting their concern for the scenography of the

[17] A few scholars have argued that atomic weaponry was not seen as unique at the outset. See, in particular, Gordin (2005) and Tannenwald (1999, 442). The evidence we present in this section challenges this claim.

[18] Truman diary entry, July 25, 1945, excerpt in http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/library/correspondence/truman-harry/corr_diary_truman.htm.

[19] February 13, 1945, http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/library/correspondence/stimson-henry/corr_diary_stimson_print.htm.
U.S. policymakers sometimes referred to the atomic bomb as the "S-1," given that its development was initially overseen by the S-1 Section of the Office of Scientific Research and Development.

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TABLE 1. Alternative Modalities of Nuclear Use in 1945

First-use option	Key features	Main advantages
Ultralethal		
Surprise attack on civilian targets	Surprise attack against cities with "relatively untouched" populations and infrastructure	Shaping widespread beliefs about the bomb's power by putting mass death and destruction on display
Less lethal		
Attack on military targets	Strike against naval base or troop formations	Supporting war effort while minimizing harm to civilians; reducing knowledge exposure (e.g., a bomb dropped on naval harbor would be difficult to salvage if it failed to detonate)
Attack after advance warning	Strike cities, but only after providing warning for civilian evacuation	
Nonlethal		
Noncombat demonstration	Detonation over a "desert or a barren island" in the presence of foreign observers	Minimizing risk of nuclear arms race, adverse precedent, and moral opprobrium

Note: The alternatives laid out on this table are virtually identical to those found on the list of alternatives officially recorded as being discussed in the Interim Committee's deliberations in Spring 1945. See "Notes on the Use by the United States of the Atomic Bomb," circa 1946 (MEDC 1942–1946, Batch 3, scans 501–600).

bomb's debut and the spectacle various options would create or diminish. This led them to reject many debut options, including the idea of putting on a noncombat demonstration and giving Japan advance warning.

Rejecting a Noncombat Demonstration

The chief alternative to using the bomb to kill large numbers of civilians was the so-called noncombat demonstration, which was debated on three important occasions from 1944 to 1945.[20] The reason-giving that led to its rejection illustrates key aspects of our performative logic.

The noncombat demonstration idea was first broached in mid-1944. Scientists at the Los Alamos National Laboratory suggested that "perhaps the best use of the gadget is in a staged field test in an American desert; to which could be invited such foreign observers as the United States desired to impress with our victory over the atom and our potential power to win victories over our future enemies." Navy Captain William S. Parsons, chief of the Ordnance Division at Los Alamos, wrote in a private report to Groves that "tender souls are appalled at the idea of the horrible destruction which this bomb might wreak in battle delivery" (September 25, 1944, quoted in Malloy 2007, 489). He then advanced the main case for rejecting such a demonstration in favor of lethal use:

> To have our project culminate in a spectacularly expensive field test in the closing months of the war, or to have it held for such demonstration after the war, is, in my opinion, one way to invite a political and military fizzle, regardless of the scientific achievement. *The principal difficulty with such a demonstration is that it would not be held one thousand feet over Times Square, where the human and material destruction would be obvious, but in an uninhabited desert, where there would be no humans and only sample structure*s…I can give assurance that the reaction of observers to a desert shot would be one of intense disappointment. Even the crater would be disappointing. (Malloy 2007, 489, emphasis added)

Parsons here foreshadows what would become a consistent theme: a focus on debut options that promised the crystal clear ruination of human life and material infrastructure. Destruction had to be "obvious." Anything less would be "spectacularly expensive" but insufficiently spectacular otherwise. J. Robert Oppenheimer, wartime director of Los Alamos, wrote to Groves that "I agree completely with all of the comments of Captain Parsons' memorandum on the fallacy of regarding a controlled test as the culmination of the work of this laboratory."[21]

Noncombat demonstration was debated again in May 1945 at a working lunch of the Interim Committee, a high level body comprising senior policymakers, scientists, and military officials tasked with advising the President on nuclear matters. Physicist Ernest O. Lawrence had suggested earlier that the United States might "give the Japanese some striking but harmless demonstration of the bomb's power before using it in a manner that would cause great loss of life" (Hewlett and Anderson 1962, 358). Lawrence recorded that the proposal "was given serious consideration by the Secretary of War and his committee," but was eventually dismissed because "Oppenheimer could think of no demonstration that would be sufficiently spectacular to convince the Japs [sic] that further resistance was useless. Oppenheimer felt, and that feeling was shared by Groves and others, that the only way to put on a demonstration would be

[20] There may have been several other instances in which key decision-makers had brief (and vague) discussions about a noncombat demonstration. See Bernstein (1975, 32–3).

[21] "Letter on Captain Parsons," October 6, 1944, http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/library/correspondence/oppenheimer-robert/corr_oppenheimer_1944-10-06.htm.

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to attack a real target of built-up structures."[22] For these individuals, then, the lethal use of the bomb was itself a demonstration—the only one that would be "sufficiently spectacular" to be effective. The Interim Committee's central conclusion was thus that the atomic bomb would be used without "any warning" with an eye toward "mak[ing] a profound psychological impression on as many of the inhabitants as possible" (May 31, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 18). Ensuring spectacular lethality was a recurrent theme whether U.S. officials were focusing on the immediate Japanese enemy, as Oppenheimer did at the working lunch, or on the Soviet Union and other international audiences as he and top level officials like Stimson and Byrnes often did on other occasions.

Noncombat demonstration was discussed a final time on June 12, 1945. A group of senior scientists at the University of Chicago's Metallurgical Laboratory, led by Nobel Prize-winning physicist James Franck, submitted a report on the "Political and Social Problems" related to atomic weapons. This "Franck Report" argued that using the bomb to destroy Japanese cities would accelerate a future nuclear arms race by making its enormous power obvious to foreign nations. Eschewing lethal use, by contrast, would "[let] the other nations come into the race only reluctantly, on the basis of guesswork and without definite knowledge that the 'thing does work'" (June 12, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 22). Atomic use in combat would also set a dangerous precedent, since "[i]t will be very difficult to persuade the world that a nation which was capable of secretly preparing and suddenly releasing a weapon…is to be trusted" not to engage in similar aggression once again. Finally, lethal atomic use would provoke intense moral opprobrium, triggering a "wave of horror and repulsion, swooping over the rest of the world, and perhaps dividing even the public opinion at home." A highly publicized noncombat demonstration, the scientists wrote, would avoid these costs:

> From this point of view a demonstration of the new weapon may best be made before the eyes of representatives of all United Nations, on the desert or a barren island…America would [then] be able to say to the world, "You see what weapon we had but did not use[.]"…After such a demonstration the weapon could be used against Japan if a sanction of the United Nations (and of the public opinion at home) could be obtained. (June 12, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 22)

The Franck Report was met with strongly negative responses from key policymakers. Objections largely focused on the proposed noncombat demonstration's underwhelming effects. Leading Manhattan Project physicist Arthur H. Compton forwarded the report to Stimson with the preface that the "failure to make a military demonstration of the new bombs" would not only risk "mak[ing] the war longer and more expensive of human lives" but also make it "impossible to impress the world with the need for national sacrifices in order to gain lasting security" (June 12, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 22). Oppenheimer also recalled opining that "the two overriding considerations were the saving of lives in the war and the effect of our actions…on our strength and the stability of the postwar world…[W]e did not think exploding one of these things as a firecracker over a desert was likely to be very impressive" (quoted in Polenberg 2002, 34). This reasoning underscores how American officials were attending to both the speed of Japanese surrender and the broader worldwide reaction, and that they sought to generate an impression with emotive power by tending to the scenography of the bomb's debut. Thus, in a final report entitled "Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Weapons," the Interim Committee's Scientific Advisory Panel concluded that a noncombat demonstration would fail not only "to bring an end to the war" but also to "promote a satisfactory adjustment of our international relations" (June 16, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 25).

Rejecting Advance Warning

Another option was to use the atomic bomb in combat, but with advance warning to reduce unnecessary civilian deaths. Such lower lethality scenarios were also rejected using similar reasoning. Advance warning was officially discussed on May 14, 1945, in connection with the idea of issuing a public statement following the first test detonation of an atomic device (May 14, 1945, in Merrill 1995, doc. 4). As Malloy (2008, 109) notes, this "would have constituted an implicit warning to the Japanese prior to use." This proposal was rejected on the grounds that it would blunt the impact of the bomb's debut and invite intrusive demands for atomic cooperation from Moscow (110). On the same day the warning possibility was discussed, Stimson told Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall that the United States had encountered difficulties with the Soviets because "we have talked too much and have been too lavish with our beneficences to them." Now that the United States held "a royal straight flush…the thing [was] not to get into unnecessary quarrels by talking too much" and "let our actions speak for themselves" (Stimson diary entry, May 14, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 12).

As the scheduled strikes drew near, however, Stimson himself briefly wavered due to moral concerns. In July, he raised to Truman the possibility of "formulat[ing] a warning to Japan" before "the full force of our newer weapons should be brought to bear in the course of which a renewed and even heavier warning, backed by the power of the new forces…should be delivered" (July 16, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 37). Here we see some concern for the problem of backlash, to which we return in a later section. The idea was struck down by Byrnes, who was not only more hawkish but significantly more influential in the Truman cabinet than Stimson (Alperovitz 1995, 489). Ever "impressed with the

[22] Lawrence to Karl K. Darrow, August 17, 1945, http://blog.nuclearsecrecy.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/1945-08-17-Lawrence-to-Darrow.pdf.

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possibilities of the new explosive" for American diplomacy, Byrnes regarded as fanciful the notion that the United States should hold back from displaying the full might of nuclear weapons due to humanitarian concerns (Leahy diary, May 20, 1945, quoted in Alperovitz 1995, 214).

The United States did issue one form of warning to Japan during the Pacific War. Under the command of Major General Curtis LeMay, U.S. Army Air Forces dropped hundreds of thousands of leaflets on Japanese cities as part of the conventional bombing campaign, with some bearing words like "ATTENTION JAPANESE PEOPLE EVACUATE YOUR CITIES" (quoted in Szasz 2009, 536). Some might see this as evidence that Japan was, in fact, warned about the atomic bombings. This is incorrect. The leaflets dropped in late July and early August listed various Japanese cities that would be firebombed, but Hiroshima was not one of them. Moreover, no leaflet ever mentioned the atomic bomb. In fact, a more accurate interpretation is that the protracted leaflet campaign added to the surprise and lethality of the atomic bombings. As historian Ferenc Morton Szasz notes, "when the *Enola Gay*, with its two escorts, appeared over Hiroshima on the early morning of August 6, 1945, the people below probably assumed that it contained yet-another-round of" the so-called LeMay Pamphlets (537).

THE SEARCH FOR "A FAIR BACKGROUND TO SHOW ITS STRENGTH"

If the United States went ahead with the lethal use of the atomic bomb, what kind of location should it target? Many initially assumed that the bomb would be used on military targets. The first interagency targeting discussion of May 1943, for example, concluded that "its best point of use would be on a Japanese fleet concentration in the Harbor of Truk[,]"—that is, Japan's main naval base in the Pacific theater (May 5, 1943, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 3). Attacking naval installations would bring the advantage of minimizing unwanted knowledge exposure: "the bomb should be used where, if it failed to go off, it would land in water of sufficient depth to prevent easy salvage." Moral concerns came into play as well. On May 25, 1945, a draft statement prepared by one of Stimson's aides suggested that the United States might initially use the bomb on "a military target like a naval base if possible so that wholesale killing of civilians will be on the heads of the Japanese who refused to surrender at our ultimatum" (quoted in Malloy 2007, 495). Proposals for such "tactical" targets resurfaced throughout the war. As late as mid-July 1945, some scientists at Los Alamos were suggesting that the bomb might be used to temporarily paralyze large troop concentrations by blinding them, since "nobody within a radius of 5 miles could look directly at the gadget and retain his eyesight" (July 17, 1945, quoted in Bernstein 1991, 158).

However, consistent with our logic of performative violence, such ideas were sidelined in favor of a more lethal debut. This was done partly with an eye toward strengthening the display's impact on outside audiences. It was pointed out at an early gathering of the Interim Committee that using "one atomic bomb on an arsenal would not be much different from the effect caused by" the ongoing conventional bombing raids of Japan. Using atomic weaponry on military targets would obscure their distinctiveness: "the visual effect of an atomic bombing would be tremendous," Oppenheimer pointed out—"It would be accompanied by a brilliant luminescence which would rise to a height of 10,000 to 20,000 feet. The neutron effect of the explosion would be dangerous to life for a radius of at least two-thirds of a mile" (May 31, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 18). Any proper use of the bomb was one that made full use of these effects.

Looking for "Untouched" Cities

As plans gravitated toward using the bomb on densely populated cities, discussions of which cities to target intensified. Here we see attention to the setting or "stage," specifically with regard to the topography of various cities and its impact on visible destruction. It was observed early on that "the contour of the terrain" surrounding "the point of detonation" would be important for "the character and extent of damage" (Parsons letter, April 6, 1945, MEDC 1942–1946, Batch 1, scans 501–600). The first official meeting of the "Target Committee"—comprising senior military and scientific personnel—thus concluded that appropriate targets could be narrowed down "to large urban areas of not less than 3 miles in diameter existing in the larger populated areas" (April 27, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 5).

Perhaps most telling, a premium was placed on cities whose population and industry were relatively intact. A conventional bombing campaign had been underway for some time. Since "the 20th Air Force [was]…laying waste all the main Japanese cities," Hiroshima rose to the top of the target list as "the largest untouched target." The city was all the more attractive because it was of "such a size that a large part of the city could be extensively damaged" and "adjacent hills" were "likely to produce a focusing effect which would considerably increase the blast damage" (May 12, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 11). Tokyo, by contrast, was ranked lower since "it is now practically all bombed and burned out and is practically rubble with only the palace grounds left standing." The second meeting of the Target Committee made clear that the goal was to achieve spectacular destruction to affect the views of foreign audiences—both in Japan and elsewhere.

> Two aspects of this are (1) obtaining the greatest psychological effect against Japan and (2) *making the initial use sufficiently spectacular for the importance of the weapon to be internationally recognized when publicity on it is released*…In this respect Kyoto has the advantage of the people being more highly intelligent and hence better able to appreciate the significance of the weapon. Hiroshima

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> has the advantage of being such a size and with possible focusing from nearby mountains that a large fraction of the city may be destroyed. (May 12, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 11, emphasis added)

Based on such considerations, the Target Committee officially recommended Hiroshima, Kyoto, and Niigata as prospective targets on May 28, 1945. In another indication of the focus on showcasing lethality, the committee agreed not to "specify aiming points" and to "neglect location of industrial areas as pin point target, since on these three targets such areas are small, spread on fringes of cities and quite dispersed." The aim was "to endeavor to place first gadget in center of selected city" to achieve "complete destruction" (May 28, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 15). Table 2 summarizes the deliberations that attended each of the potential targets.

Preserving Targets for the Grand Debut

U.S. leaders' attention to preserving an appropriate "stage space" for the atomic bomb's debut is also evident in how they sought to preserve Hiroshima's "untouched" status with an eye toward amplifying the bomb's impact. As early as May 1944, Captain Parsons at Los Alamos was stressing the importance of adjusting the technical details of the atomic bomb's use to ensure that "there will be the maximum number of structures (dwellings and factories) damaged beyond repair" (Parsons letter, May 19, 1944, MEDC 1942–1946, Batch 1, scans 601–700). This concern became even more pertinent as opinions converged on the choice of targets. On June 6, 1945, Stimson briefed Truman on the Interim Committee's conclusions, telling the President that he "was trying to hold the Air Force down to precisionbombing" [sic] in Japan until decisions on the atomic bomb were implemented. The chief concern was that conventional destruction would put a damper on the bomb's debut; Stimson was "fearful that before we could get ready the Air Force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon would not have a fair background to show its strength" (June 6, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 21).

Stimson's guidance was stressed over and over again in the form of specific orders. As early as May 17, nearly 2 weeks before the Target Committee had submitted Hiroshima, Niigata, and Kyoto as its official recommendations, a top-secret memo directed U.S. air forces in the Pacific that "no bombing attacks [should] be made against" these cities since they were "tentatively established as initial targets for the 509th Composite Group"—that is, the unit tasked with the deployment of the atomic bomb. Indicating an early focus on surprise and lethality, the memo also stressed that "this

TABLE 2. Deliberations on Target Cities for Atomic Bombing

City	Target list	Reasoning	Note
Hiroshima	"AA" (most desirable)	"[A]djacent hills…likely to produce a focusing effect which would considerably increase the blast damage. Due to rivers it is not a good incendiary target [and thus has been spared from firebombing campaign]."	Undisputed favorite target from the first Target Committee meeting of May 2, 1945
Kyoto	"AA" (most desirable)	"[M]any people and industries are now being moved there as other areas are being destroyed…[Also] an intellectual center for Japan and the people there are more apt to appreciate the significance of such a weapon…."	Replaced on final target list with Kokura by Stimson's intervention
Kokura	"A" (desirable)	"[Hosts] one of the largest arsenals in Japan and… urban industrial structures"; "[If] properly placed…[the bomb could destroy] more solid structures and…blast damage could be done to more feeble structures further away."	Bombing prevented by cloud/ smoke cover on August 9; bomber heads to Nagasaki instead
Yokohama	"A" (desirable)	"[U]rban industrial area which has so far been untouched…[D]isadvantage of the most important target areas being separated by a large body of water and of being in the heaviest anti-aircraft concentration…."	
Niigata	"B" (adequate)	"[P]ort of embarkation on the N.W. coast of Honshu. Its importance is increasing as other ports are damaged."	
Nagasaki	Initially considered inadequate	Topography would absorb (rather than focus) blast; already hit by several firebombing raids.	Added as backup for Kokura on July 24
Tokyo	Inadequate	"[N]ow practically all bombed and burned out and is practically rubble with only the palace grounds left standing."	

Sources: NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 5; NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 11; Malloy 2008, 135; Gordin 2005, 45.
Note: Boldface indicates cities on the final target list of July 25, 1945.

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directive should receive minimum distribution and accomplished without publicity" (COMAF 20 memo, May 17, 1945, MEDC Batch 1, scans 401–500). General Groves again reminded the military leadership on June 30 that "Kokura, Hiroshima and Niigata" should "be reserved and…not be attacked[,]" recommending that the Joint Chiefs of Staff issue formal orders in this regard "so that there can be no possible misunderstanding with respect to the preservation of the targets" (Groves letter, June 30, 1945, MEDC 1942–1946, Batch 1, scans 201–300). The Joint Chiefs of Staff immediately assented, ordering top commanders in the Far East to refrain from conducting attacks of any kind on the target cities unless otherwise instructed (JCS memo, June 30, 1945, MEDC 1942–1946, Batch 1, scans 201–300).

Secret orders to spare a handful of major enemy cities from destruction would have made little immediate sense to subordinates. They appear eminently sensible, however, once we understand that top policymakers were attending to the minute details of the bomb's debut. They adopted a mindset akin to that of a theater director assiduously heeding the "look and feel" of their new gadget's first major performance. Their preference was faithfully executed. One postwar journalistic account reported that "the continued abstinence of [U.S. conventional bombings] with respect to Hiroshima had made its citizens jittery" in the days leading up to August 6, 1945; "a rumor was going around that the Americans were saving something special for the city" (Hersey [1946] 1999, 5).

Tending to the Problem of Backlash

Our logic of performative violence interprets violent spectacles as carefully orchestrated displays meant to "elicit particular responses from" their audiences (Bakogianni 2015, 5) and "lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with [one's] own plans" (Goffman 1959, 4). In this regard, it is important to emphasize that U.S. leaders staged the violent debut of the atomic bomb to shape perceptions of American power and influence in the postwar international order, not to convince key audiences of American unbridled savagery. We thus find that U.S. leaders foresaw the risks of reckless excess, such as revulsion and backlash against American power. Policymakers grappled with this problem as they weighed the political and moral costs of using the bomb. In the same letter to Truman where he discussed his concern about securing a "fair background" for the atomic bomb's debut, Stimson wrote that he "did not want to have the United States get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities" (June 6, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 21).

Therefore, even as they rejected options that failed to magnify bloodshed and destruction of the built environment, U.S. leaders also tried to channel this ultralethal debut to minimize the problem of backlash. The most telling example is found in Stimson's intervention to replace Kyoto on the Target Committee's final recommendation with Kokura, citing Kyoto's cultural and moral significance for the Japanese people. Stimson noted in his diary that the President was "particularly emphatic in agreeing with my suggestion that" if a city that was historically so endearing to the Japanese was destroyed, "the bitterness which would be caused by such a wanton act might make it impossible during the long post-war period to reconcile the Japanese to us…rather than to the Russians" (July 24, 1945, quoted in Kelly 2012, 201).

Moreover, although images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki's ravaged landscapes were widely circulated in the aftermath of Japan's surrender, U.S. officials took care to censor or downplay public knowledge of some of the more repellent dimensions of the bomb's effects. Foremost among these were the bombings' radiological consequences on the bodies of survivors. As journalist Lesley Blume (2020, 11, 149) writes, while American policymakers saw publicity on Hiroshima's destruction as a useful means to "showcas[e], to great effect, the devastating power of the United States' new weapon[,]" they were also embarrassed by certain aspects of the coverage and especially by "allegations that the United States had bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki recklessly and without elaborate consideration." Tailored lethality and sustained impression management were needed for the atomic bomb's first performance to redound favorably to America's position in the postwar international order.

Keeping a Wide Audience in Mind

As we note above, a key cleavage in the historiographical debate is the relative importance of the Japanese and Soviet audiences in the decision to use the atomic bomb. Our "middle ground plus" argument focuses on how U.S. policymakers sought to also dramatize the atomic bomb's revolutionary lethality to influence perceptions of American power in the postwar international order. This implies a *global* audience that goes beyond the Japanese versus Soviet dichotomy.

To be sure, the focus on securing a preponderant position in the international order meant that U.S. policymakers would invariably think long and hard about the atomic debut's impact on the Soviet Union's impression of the atomic bomb. Thus, after an April 1945 meeting in which Truman was briefed on "all of the facts with respect to the Manhattan Engineer District," Groves recorded that "[a] great deal of emphasis was placed on foreign relations and particularly on Russian relations" (April 25, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 6C). In this respect, our findings support the revisionist focus on Moscow, as well as variants of the middle ground position which hold that ensuring "Russia will not get in so much on the kill" in key global regions at war's end was a powerful motive behind Truman's atomic bomb decisions in addition to accelerating Japan's surrender (Byrnes on July 24, 1945 according to Walter Brown, quoted in Hasegawa 2005, 159).

That said, we also see evidence for the role of a more expansive audience. Recall, as a case in point, that the central goals that guided the Target Committee's deliberations in April–May 1945 were "(1) obtaining the greatest psychological effect against Japan and (2) making the initial use sufficiently spectacular for the importance of

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the weapon to be *internationally recognized* when publicity on it is released" (May 12, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 11, emphasis added). The following month, Oppenheimer's top-secret "Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Atomic Weapons" to the Interim Committee rejected the noncombat demonstration option with the argument that "[t]his use…should be such as to promote a satisfactory adjustment of our international relations." The group of countries whose reactions this memo deems significant includes Britain, Russia, France, and China (June 16, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 25). Stimson affirmed the importance of a broad international audience in a conversation with General Henry Arnold on July 23, 1945, where the two discussed "the effect on other nations" along with "the psychological reaction of the Japanese themselves" (Arnold 1949, 589).

It is possible that terms such as "other nations" or "international" onlookers were simply veiled references to the Soviet Union. However, the more plausible and straightforward interpretation is that they referred to a wider audience. Direct references to the Soviet Union were common among U.S. policymakers at this time. Our earlier review of American thinking about relative power (see the "Postwar International Order and U.S.–Soviet Relative Power" section) highlights numerous top-level exchanges on the Soviets, such as Stimson's vivid note to Truman that the United States should not "hold the leg for Stalin to skin the deer" at the end of the war (quoted in Malloy 2008, 74). This suggests that U.S. leaders had no qualms about speaking candidly about Moscow in closed door discussions or sensitive documents. If anything, policymakers mentioning "international" audiences or "other nations" seem to have been trying to convey the importance of a larger set of countries beyond the more obvious interlocutors.

Second, we find clear evidence that key officials were sensitive to the reactions of a truly global audience, rather than just those of Moscow, in the process that led to the dismissal of the noncombat demonstration. As we noted in the "Rejecting a Noncombat Demonstration" section, the scientists who supported this alternative wanted "a demonstration of the new weapon…before the eyes of representatives of all United Nations." Scientist-administrator Arthur Compton similarly focused on world reactions when relaying this proposal to Stimson, advancing the opposite conclusion that a nonlethal debut would make it "impossible to impress the world" with the bomb's power (June 12, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 22).

Historian Martin Sherwin's analysis of how Manhattan Project insiders like Compton came to think about the bomb's debut provides critical context. "The Target Committee's concern that the full implications of the bomb be recognized internationally reflected a pervasive anxiety among those scientists who had begun to worry about the bomb's role in the postwar world," he writes. Whether the bomb would be used "[a]s an instrument of peace based on the international control of atomic energy, or as an instrument of diplomacy to be used in postwar negotiations, the influence of the weapon depended upon a *general recognition* that pre-atomic age calculations had to give way to new realities." This anxiety underscored the case for unveiling the bomb to the world "in the *most dramatic fashion* possible" (Sherwin 1985, 11, emphasis added). Ray Monk's detailed study also makes clear that key scientists and administrators at Los Alamos had numerous conversations about the impact that the atomic bomb would have on "civilization," where Oppenheimer and others regularly argued that the United States would achieve its aims for the atomic bomb "only if its awesome power were made clear to *everyone* and this could, in turn, only be done if it were actually used" in war (2014, 361, emphasis added).[23] Such conversations informed, among other things, the Target Committee's decision to explicitly state that one of its top priorities was to ensure that "the importance of the weapon" would be "internationally recognized" through the bomb's first use (360).

In short, American policymakers displayed a consistent awareness of the atomic bomb's potential to reshape the United States' standing in the broader international system as they deliberated the significance of the bomb and how to reveal it to the world. While Japanese and Soviet reactions were unquestionably important, dramatizing the atomic bomb's lethal capability was also deemed valuable because it was expected to favorably alter international perceptions of the bomb and its possessor. In the Supplementary Material, we briefly examine evidence from after August 1945 to assess the extent to which U.S. policymakers achieved this expansive goal.

SUMMARY AND ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

To review, we find several kinds of evidence supporting the theoretical logic of performative violence via a spectacular display. U.S. leaders perceived a need to redress their conventional military inferiority and shore up Washington's ability to shape the postwar international order. They also sought to showcase the revolutionary nature of atomic weaponry. Noncombat demonstrations, advance warning, military targets, and cities that had already been decimated were seen as insufficient "stages" for such a spectacular performance. The nuanced aspects of how to debut the bomb—for example, whether to warn civilians; whether to target large cities instead of strictly military targets; prioritizing intact cities and keeping them that way until the day of the debut; and sparing certain targets from destruction to avoid unintended backlash—were guided by the imperative of showcasing the bomb's revolutionary power in a way that would effectively

[23] The first individual to have articulated this view appears to have been physicist Niels Bohr, who maintained as early as January 1944 that once "the power of atomic bombs was made clear to everybody," this "very terribleness" might "force upon the countries of the world a fundamental change in international relations, one that would make war itself obsolete" (Monk 2014, 335–6).

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strengthen perceptions of American power and influence in the postwar order.

We now address three potential alternative explanations. The first is the traditionalist claim that the United States debuted the atomic bomb in a spectacularly violent manner to accelerate Japanese surrender and end the war more swiftly (e.g., Stimson 1985). Two points are in order here. First, forcing a quick Japanese surrender was indeed an important goal for U.S. leaders at this time, and our analytical framework clarifies the mechanism that was expected to produce the "profound psychological impression" needed to elicit this surrender (May 31, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc. 18). It thus substantiates previous scholarly observations on the importance of generating a shock (e.g., Rhodes 1986, 697). But second, and more importantly, there is simply too much evidence that U.S. officials factored in audiences beyond Japan when deliberating atomic debut options. Over and over again, critics of the noncombat demonstration and other less lethal options invoked the importance of a dramatically violent revelation of the bomb for resetting views about U.S. power in Moscow and other relevant capitals. In the Supplementary Material, we further document how U.S. policymakers *after* Hiroshima paid close attention to broader international views of the atomic bomb and encouraged beliefs in its revolutionary character.

A second alternative explanation focuses on the way a noncombat debut scenario could end in a "dud." In a famous 1947 article, Stimson claimed that the idea of putting on "a demonstration in some uninhabited area" was dismissed due to fears of it being "followed by a dud" (Stimson 1985, 6). Compton's 1956 memoir also reports concerns about the "intricate device" fizzling (Compton 1956, 238–9). There are two problems with this explanation. First, it only addresses the noncombat versus combat use decision point. Fears of a "dud" do not explain how U.S. leaders thought about various lethal debut scenarios. The emphasis on targeting relatively undamaged cities, for example, remains a puzzle. Second, our review of the evidence shows that the "dud" concern only appears in the Interim Committee discussions among a litany of afterthoughts that follow the deciding objection that a "harmless demonstration" would not be "spectacular" enough (see Hewlett and Anderson 1962, 358). Dud fears do not appear at all in the June 1945 report sent to Stimson by the Scientific Advisory Panel in which a "technical demonstration" was rejected as inadequate for "promot[ing] a satisfactory adjustment of our international relations" (June 16, 1945, NSAEBB716 2020, doc 25).

The final alternative focuses on racial animus and revenge. Historian John Dower has documented "blatantly racist thinking" on both sides of the Pacific War, arguing that the "dehumanization of the [racial] Other…surely facilitated the decisions to make civilian populations the targets of concentrated attack, whether by conventional or nuclear weapons" (Dower 1986, x, emphasis added, 11). Recent IR research on racialized retribution lends credence to this claim (e.g., Byun and Kwon 2025; Liberman and Skitka 2019). However, there are several reasons to believe that anti-Japanese racism was a facilitating rather than causally decisive condition. First, the atomic bomb was initially developed for use against Germany. Had it been used against Germany, the value to U.S. leaders of a spectacularly lethal display of the new atomic bomb's revolutionary features would also have applied (Downes 2012, 140). Second, racialized language—even in implicit or coded form—is surprisingly absent in the reason-giving of policymakers during the closed door deliberations preceding Hiroshima.[24] Debates were often callous toward civilian casualties, to be sure, but the discussion overwhelmingly focused on the broader strategic importance of clarifying the atomic bomb's power. Finally, racial dehumanization does not clearly explain the selection among various Japanese targets. If racially tinged retribution was the dominant motivation, why not target the capital or the symbolically significant Kyoto? Why did debates converge on Hiroshima? Only an explanation that highlights the importance of performative violence and curated spectacles for generating an indelible impression on an international audience fully captures the appeal of specific targets.[25]

CONCLUSION

Our study makes two major contributions. For IR scholarship, we provide a new theoretical lens to interpret a formative event for the field. We show that concerns about the staging and emotive power of performative violence critically informed the first use of nuclear weapons in world history. An analysis based on this lens suggests a distinctive origin story for the post-1945 international order. John Ikenberry's (2001, 169) influential account holds that U.S. leaders at the end of World War II recognized that the "extraordinary asymmetry in power" in favor of the United States would be the "defining feature of the postwar situation" and saw self-restraining international institutions as a strategy to incentivize acquiescence to a U.S.-led international order. Our account differs in two important ways. First, we show that American preponderance was far less obvious in the summer of 1945 than suggested in Ikenberry's narrative. Truman, for example, lamented that even after Nagasaki, there were "some people in the world who do not seem to understand anything except the number of divisions you have" (Bernstein 1975, 67). Further, American leaders believed that *how* atomic weaponry was revealed would affect whether foreign

[24] On implicit racial tropes in classified discussions of foreign policy, see Carson, Min, and Van Nuys (2024). Language embodying racialized vengeance does occasionally appear in postwar rationalizations of the atomic bombings. Two days after the Nagasaki bombing, Truman replied to a religious leader's criticism of his decision that "Nobody is more disturbed over the use of Atomic bombs than I am but I was greatly disturbed over the unwarranted attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor…*When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast*" (quoted in Bernstein 1975, 61, emphasis added).

[25] For a skeptical view of the role of racism in the atomic bomb decisions, see Alperovitz (1995, 655–5).

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audiences saw the technology as "a New Fact in the world's power politics" (Werth 1964, 1044). Second, unlike Ikenberry's focus on restraint, our evidence suggests that a spectacular, ultralethal demonstration was just as integral to the "ordering moment" of 1945 as the creation of self-restraining international institutions. In fact, the latter may not have made much sense without the former.

Our darker interpretation of the "liberal" international order's birth underscores the link between the tremendously lethal and graphic violence the United States inflicted on Hiroshima and the strategic restraint that supposedly characterized America's postwar foreign policy. This suggests fruitful avenues for further research, both on the illiberal conditions that enabled the liberal international order and on the coercive value of nuclear weapons. On the latter, scholars have debated the role of nuclear weapons in coercive diplomacy since Brodie (1946). Recent scholarship remains sharply divided on this topic, with some maintaining that "nuclear superiority" can deliver coercive rewards against inferior opponents (e.g., Beardsley and Asal 2009; Kroenig 2018), but others arguing that nuclear weapons do not offer much leverage (e.g., Fanlo and Sukin 2023; Sechser and Fuhrmann 2017) or only do so under narrow conditions (e.g., Debs 2025). Our findings offer two important takeaways for this research program. First, acts of nuclear coercion may have implications beyond the specific dyad that is engaged in crisis or war. We have shown that, in one exceedingly important case, a great power used nuclear weapons hoping to collect broader, long-term coercive dividends from a diffuse "audience" beyond the immediate target of attack. Second, evidence that U.S. leaders valued the emotive power of mass destruction calls for deeper research on the mechanisms of nuclear coercion. Abstract information about the effects of nuclear strikes—such as that often featured in survey experimental research (e.g., Ju and Byun 2024; Sagan and Valentino 2017)—may not generate the profound emotional reactions that U.S. leaders were aiming for with the bomb's ultralethal debut. Future research should pay attention to the diffuse coercive potential of nuclear weapons and how lethal spectacles—as opposed to abstract knowledge—might inform the potency of nuclear coercion.

Second, our study underscores how performative logics can offer explanatory purchase on episodes of mass violence that occur in various realms of politics and across different subfields of political science. Previous works have shown that the desire to reap the political rewards of "putting violence on display" lay at the heart of seemingly gratuitous violence in the domestic sphere (Fujii 2021, 2). Others have identified the performative motivations that drove episodes of mass colonial violence (e.g., MacDonald 2023; Wagner 2016), and at least one scholar has suggested a performative explanation for the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Butt 2019). We have expanded on this scholarship, showing that scholars can better understand important details of the historic atomic bomb decisions by appreciating how politically attractive a spectacularly violent nuclear debut was for U.S. leaders in 1945, and why less violent debut options were so unappealing by comparison.

Future scholarship should explore the possibilities of developing the logic of performance into a broader and synthetic framework that could shed light on various understudied aspects of human violence. There is no shortage of violent acts today that, despite being vulgar and mystifying at first glance, may make more sense when viewed through a performative lens. Israel's response to the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, prompted worldwide condemnation and accusations of genocide, particularly after graphic videos and photographs of Israel's victims in Gaza were publicized. However, Israel's operations also created a highly visible spectacle of military power in part *because* of the catastrophic destruction they wrought on the built environment of Gaza and the human lives there. Some commentators have accordingly speculated that the goal of the Gaza campaign is to alter widespread perceptions of Israeli power to resemble a time, "decades ago, when Israel's military superiority was so overwhelming that no other power in the region could dare seriously challenge it" (Grenier 2024). Similarly, some analysts of Russia's behavior in Ukraine hint at the role of performative violence. Russia often seems to launch ballistic missiles in the war, for example, to "ostentatiously showcase" its capabilities and "amplify the spectacle of the strike" (Mappes et al., 2024, 2).

More broadly, scholars interested in various facets of wartime civilian victimization (e.g., Balcells and Stanton 2021; Downes 2012), the debut of new and supposedly revolutionary military technologies like combat "drone swarms" (e.g., Bajak 2024) and other lethal autonomous weapons, and the potential for the future *re*introduction of nuclear weapons on the modern battlefield (e.g., Ju and Byun 2024; Smetana and Onderco 2025) should adapt the performative arguments we lay out in this article. Scholars who have already used performative theory to explain lynchings, colonial and civil war atrocities, and poorly legitimized invasions of smaller countries can also expand their efforts with the richer logics we offer, such as insights on the importance of stage selection, stage curation, and tending to backlash. After all, if a theoretical approach that illuminated such events now provides a deeper understanding of the historic atomic bombing decisions of 1945, it has already established its promise as a general logic that travels remarkably well across different subfields and levels of analysis. We thus invite political scientists of all stripes to lean into this approach, given how much we still have to learn about violence and war.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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Both authors contributed equally to this article.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors affirm this research did not involve human participants.

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