

NEW EVIDENCE ON TRUMAN'S DECISION

Robert L. Messer

The first atomic bomb, produced by the ultrasecret Manhattan Project at a cost of \$2 billion, exploded in the desert near Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945, flashing with "the brightness of several suns at midday" and forcing a huge purplish mushroom cloud high into the atmosphere. It ushered in the atomic age. Three weeks later, on August 6, the Japanese city of Hiroshima was instantly leveled by an atomic bomb dropped from an American B-29. Some 130,000 people were killed, tens of thousands of others suffered burns, wounds, and nuclear poisoning. On August 9 another atomic bomb flattened Nagasaki, killing at least 60,000 people. Four days later the Japanese surrendered.

Assessments of the motives behind the decision to drop the atomic bombs have tended to cluster historians into opposing camps. Those labeled "traditionalist" or "orthodox" echo President Truman's and Secretary of War Henry Stimson's contentions that the bombs were used to force Japan's surrender as quickly as possible and to save American lives. They maintain that the alternatives discussed—detonating an atomic bomb on an unpopulated island with Japanese observers as witnesses; continuing to blockade and conventionally bomb Japan; encouraging the Soviet Union to declare war on Japan more quickly; pursuing Tokyo's peace feelers—would have taken too long or failed to convince the Japanese that they had to surrender at once. Contrarily, "revisionist" historians argue that the bombs were not vital to defeating Japan and that they were utilized to influence Soviet behavior. According to this interpretation, American willingness to drop atomic bombs on Japan might intimidate the Soviet Union into making concessions in eastern Europe, might serve as a deterrent against Soviet aggression, or might end the war in the Pacific before the Soviet Union could enter and thus claim a role in the postwar management of Asia.

In the following selections, historians Messer and Alperovitz offer new evidence on President Truman's personal views, speculate on their implications, and reveal the dangers of making conclusive historical judgements on the basis of fragmentary evidence.

FROM: CHAFE AND SITKOFF, EDs., *A HISTORY OF OUR TIME*
(1995), 9-21.

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The use of atomic bombs on Japanese cities at the end of World War II is one of the most debated and analyzed events in history. This discussion is not an attempt to explain that event. Rather, to borrow a phrase from Senator Howard Baker during the Watergate hearings, the focus is upon what the president knew and when he knew it. My purpose is not to indict President Truman, but only to clarify his role in a larger process.

The main source of information for such a clarification is not White House tape recordings, but something very nearly as candid and revealing—the president's own words. Not just his public statements, or his own writings on the subject after the fact, but Truman's private journal and letters written at the time he gave the bombing order.

The recent discovery of this evidence helps us to understand better at least some aspects of a forty-year-old issue. It reveals, for example that, contrary to his public justification of the bombings as the only way to end the war without a costly invasion of Japan, Truman had already concluded that Japan was about to capitulate. Whether or not he was correct in this estimate of when the war would end, the fact that he held this view at the time he made his decision to use the bomb is clearly set down in his own hand.

This new evidence is not a "smoking gun" that settles the old issue of why the bomb was used. But it tells us more than we knew before about the timing of the bombings. It also tells us more than Harry Truman, for all his famous candor, ever told us.

In his first public statements regarding the use of the bomb, on August 6, 1945, Truman explained that this terrible new weapon represented an American victory in a life-and-death "race against the Germans." It had been dropped on a place called Hiroshima, which the president described

as "a military base." It would continue to be used, he said, "until we have completely destroyed Japan's capacity to make war."

Even then there were those, although in a distinct minority, who raised questions about the bombings. What relevance to its use against Japan, they asked, was the fear that Hitler might get the bomb first? Three months before the atomic bombs fell on Japanese cities, Germany had surrendered. Months before that, Allied scientists had concluded that the worst-case scenario, which had prompted the Anglo-American atomic bomb project, was overly pessimistic. The Germans lagged far behind in the race for the bomb. Even more to the point, there had been no serious concern about a Japanese bomb. Was the bomb used then merely "because it was there," to justify its existence and its unprecedented expense?

Regarding the bomb's specific military justification, critics conceded that Hiroshima, as a major port and regional army headquarters, and Nagasaki, with its many war plants, contained legitimate military targets. We now know that those same targets could have been destroyed earlier by the sort of conventional bombing that had leveled just about every important military objective in Japan. In fact, the cities set aside as possible atomic targets were deliberately left virgin, so as not to obscure the effects of the new weapon. It soon became clear, however, that the radius of destruction of even those first-generation 13-kiloton bombs far exceeded the size of any "military base." Casualty figures varied greatly, but all showed that the overwhelming majority of those killed and wounded were civilians in their homes, not soldiers or war workers on the assembly line. For having reversed the ratio of military and unavoidable or "incidental" civilian deaths, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings were condemned, even at the time, by proponents of the principles of just war as "America's atomic atrocity."

Such moral and religious outrage was confined almost exclusively to those who also had condemned conventional "obliteration" or "terror" bombing of civilians earlier in the war. By 1945 the technology of mass destruction had combined with the doctrine of total war to lower the moral threshold for all but a few dissenters. Many times brighter and hotter, the atomic fireballs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki were nonetheless

1. From the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*. Copyright © 1985 by the Educational Foundation for Nuclear Science, 6042 South Kimbark, Chicago, IL 60637, USA. A one year subscription to the Bulletin is \$30. Endnotes omitted.

dimmed when set against the precedents of the firestorms of Hamburg, Dresden, and Tokyo.

The early critics also were at a disadvantage in assailing the broader military, political, and moral justification for the bombings. The bomb was used, said Truman, "to destroy Japans' capacity to make war." Few outside government could then know to what extent that war-making capacity had been destroyed before the use of atomic weapons. Certainly the Japanese surrender within days after Hiroshima and hours after Nagasaki were bombed seemed to leave no doubt in the minds of almost all Americans: This new bomb had ended history's greatest and most destructive war; without it the war might have dragged on for many months, even years.

In announcing the bombings the president had said that they were carried out in order to "shorten the agony of war" and save "thousands and thousands of American lives." Later he would be more specific, citing the estimated 250,000 Allied casualties expected to result from the planned invasion of Japan. Added to the Allied losses were the estimates of Japanese casualties in a prolonged war. These ranged from 500,000 to 5 million. Official U.S. estimates of Japanese killed in the atomic attacks totaled about 110,000. Thus, in saving more lives than they took, the atomic bombings were justified as the lesser of two evils.²

At the time few could argue with such logic. Indeed, opinion polls taken immediately after the war showed that for every American who thought the bombs should not have been used (5 percent) more than four times as many (23 percent) were disappointed that more bombs had not been dropped before Japan had a chance to surrender. Predictably the majority of those polled (54 percent) backed Truman's decision to use just two bombs on cities as the proper and prudent middle course. Of course, none of these people knew then that the entire U.S. nuclear arsenal had

been expended in as rapid succession as possible, without waiting for a response to the first of the only two bombs available.

It was not long, however, before critics of the bomb decision got what seemed authoritative support for their contention that Japan was already defeated by the summer of 1945 and that therefore the use of the bomb had been an unnecessary, wanton act. The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey's official report on the Pacific War appeared less than one year after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings and on the eve of a controversial series of atomic tests at Bikini atoll.

The authors of this massive, authoritative study of Japan's war-making capability concluded that "the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs did not defeat Japan, nor, by the testimony of the enemy leaders who ended the war, did they persuade Japan to accept unconditional surrender." Rather, the bombs, along with conventional air power, naval blockade, Soviet intervention, and other internal and external pressures acted "jointly and cumulatively" as "lubrication" of a peace-making machinery set in motion months before the atomic attacks. The Survey's analysts concluded that "certainly prior to 31 December 1945 and in all probability prior to November 1945 Japan would have surrendered, even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated."

Responding to a resurgence of criticism based upon the Bombing Survey's findings, Truman moved quickly to pre-empt such secondguessing of his use of the bomb. The point man for the Administration's public counteroffensive was Henry L. Stimson, former secretary of war and a key adviser on atomic matters at the time of the bomb decision. In responding to the president's urging that he "set the record straight" Stimson agreed on the need to get out in front of the issue and "satisfy the doubts of that rather difficult class of the community ... namely educators and historians."

Sharing this concern about how future historians might judge the bomb decision, Truman lent his full support, during his years in the White House, to Stimson's writings on the subject and other such projects. After retiring to private life, he repeated—in private interviews, public state-

2. After the war Truman said that he had been told that the population of the target cities was about 60,000. Hiroshima's population was in fact more than 350,000 and Nagasaki's about 280,000. Of these, nearly 200,000 were killed and 150,000 injured.

ments, and his two-volume memoirs—that he had always regarded the bomb strictly as a weapon and had no thought or regret, either at the time or in retrospect or wisdom of its use against Japan. Any speculation about how things might have been done differently was based upon hindsight. Truman frequently cut off any further discussion of the subject with the observation that "any schoolboy's afterthought is worth more than all the generals' forethought."

In his off-the-record comments Truman was more blunt. To a correspondent who had questioned the propriety of the air of celebration surrounding the news of the bombings, the president responded with the observation: "When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast." Similarly, Truman had no sympathy for anyone else who might have second thoughts. Even before Robert Oppenheimer publicly confessed to having "known sin" in helping to build the bomb, Truman dismissed him as typical of the "crybaby scientists" who thought they had blood on their hands.

Even years after wartime passions had cooled, Truman remained unapologetic. When in the 1960s the makers of a television documentary suggested that he might travel to Japan as a goodwill gesture, the former president replied in classic Trumanesque language: "I'll go ... but I won't kiss their ass." Perhaps fortunately for all concerned the crusty old man never made the proposed trip to Hiroshima. Until his death in 1972 Truman held firm to his original justification for the bombings.

The formulation by Truman, Stimson, and other official or "orthodox" defenders of the bomb decision established the terms of the debate and held the high ground of privileged sources and classified information for many years. That defense rested upon the military necessity and therefore the lesser-of-two-evils morality of the decision. The bomb had been dropped because not to do so risked prolonging the war. By ending the war the bomb saved lives, American and Japanese. The reason for using it was strictly military—to hasten the surrender of Japan. There had been no ulterior political motives: neither domestic, in justifying a very expensive weapons development project, nor international, in regard to any power other than Japan.

In the emerging Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union the last point was perhaps the most important. The term "atomic diplomacy" had first appeared in Pravda within weeks after the end of the war. The charge that the Truman Administration was attempting to use the United States' atomic monopoly to intimidate the Soviet Union was picked up by political mavericks in the United States, such as Franklin Roosevelt's former vice-president, Henry Wallace, as well as by influential voices from abroad, such as British Nobel Prize laureate in physics P. M. S. Blackett.

Blackett pointed out that the invasion of Japan, the next major U.S. military action, was not scheduled to begin until November. However, the Soviet Union, under an agreement signed by the Big Three leaders at Yalta early in 1945, was scheduled to enter the war against Japan in August, three months before the planned invasion.

After Germany's defeat, the Soviets represented Japan's last hope for a negotiated peace, and American leaders knew of Japanese peace feelers in Moscow. Why then was there the rush to use the bomb before Moscow dashed Japan's hopes by declaring war? The impact of that major diplomatic and military blow might well have brought about surrender. Why not at least wait to find out?

Blackett concluded that the timing and circumstances of the atomic bombings made sense only as an effort at atomic diplomacy directed at the Soviet Union. He put the "revisionist" cause succinctly in his observation that "the dropping of the atomic bomb was not so much the last military act of the second World War, as the first major operation in the cold diplomatic war with Russia now in progress."

The basic elements of the debate over the bomb decision remained essentially unchanged over the years. The revisionist hypothesis, largely deductive and circumstantial, won few converts beyond the left. Twenty years after the bombs fell on Japan, former State Department official-turned-historian Herbert Feis concluded that, even though we can say, with the advantage of hindsight, that the use of atomic bombs at that juncture probably was unnecessary to bring about Japan's surrender before the planned invasion, the decision-makers "ought not to be censured."

Although perhaps mistaken, they acted in good faith. They sincerely believed, based upon the best evidence available to them at the time, that using this new weapon was the best, surest, and quickest way to end the war.

Feis and other orthodox defenders of the faith in U.S. leaders dismissed New Left revisionist arguments on grounds of ideological preconceptions, selective use of evidence, and shoddy scholarship. Although in some cases deserved, such criticism of the revisionist challenge could not altogether offset the mounting evidence against the original orthodox defense.

The declassification of government documents and presidential papers, and the release of privately held manuscript sources such as Stimson's private diary forced a revision if not a total refutation of accepted orthodoxy. Drawing upon this newly available primary source material, scholars put forth analyses that were more balanced, more penetrating, and more convincing than either extreme in the previous debate over the bomb.

In the 1970s the work of Martin Sherwin, Barton Bernstein, Gregg Herken, and others revealed the early and continuing connection U.S. leaders made between the bomb and diplomacy. Recent scholarship has stressed the continuity of atomic policy from Roosevelt to Truman. Concerning the motives or objectives of this policy, by the 1980s it was generally accepted that considerations of the bomb's effect on postwar Soviet behavior had been one of the several factors contributing to what was in the end a virtually irresistible presumption in favor of using the bomb.

While it is true that dropping the bomb was virtually a foregone conclusion, it does not follow that Truman was, as General Groves described him, merely "a little boy on a toboggan." Dependent upon his advisers and far from a free agent, he was still the ultimate decision-maker. He was the only person who had the final say—not only on whether the bomb would be used at all, but when and how it would be used. With the Soviet Union about to enter the war, the decision not to tell Stalin about the bomb and the decision to drop all the available bombs in advance of Soviet entry take on major implications for our understanding of the overall decision.

Until recently the evidence of Truman's thinking at the moment he gave the order to deliver the bombs was largely circumstantial or indirect. Those "rather difficult" historians Stimson had worried about were able to reconstruct in detail the views of Truman's key advisers. We know, for example, that Truman's secretary of state, James F. Byrnes, wanted to use the bomb to end the war before Moscow "could get in so much on the kill." It is clear from his diary entries at the time that Stimson saw the bomb as the United States' "master card" in dealing, not just with Japan, but with the Soviet Union as well. But there did not seem to be comparable direct evidence about Truman's private thinking on the bomb at the time he made the decision.

The first batch of this new evidence on the bomb decision surfaced in 1979. It had been misfiled among the family records of Truman's press secretary at the Truman presidential library. This sheaf of handwritten notes made up Truman's private journal kept during his trip to the Big Three summit meeting at Potsdam outside Berlin in July 1945.

During that trip Truman first learned of the successful test explosion of a plutonium device in New Mexico, gave the order for the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, and, as he sailed home, received the news that his order had been carried out. The event, he said at the time, was "the greatest thing in history."

Four years after the discovery of Truman's Potsdam diary a second batch of new evidence of Truman's contemporary thinking on matters relating to the use of the bomb turned up among his widow's private papers. These letters, written during that same Potsdam trip, along with other private correspondence between Bess and Harry Truman had been presumed destroyed years earlier. But they had somehow survived.

Taken together, these two sets of documents shed new light on how Truman came to grips with an entirely new force in human affairs and how he incorporated his understanding of the bomb into his thoughts about when, how, and on whose terms the war would end.

The first news of the successful test detonation in New Mexico reached Truman on the evening of July 16. The message gave no details about the size of the explosion. Although he makes no explicit reference to the bomb in his diary entry for that date, the news of its existence may

have moved him to reflect upon the relation between technology and morality: "I hope for some sort of peace—but I fear that machines are ahead of morals by some centuries and when morals catch up perhaps there'll be no reason for any of it. I hope not. But we are only termites on a planet and maybe when we bore too deeply into the planet there'll [be] a reckoning—who knows?" Elsewhere in this diary, after the bomb's power had been made clear to him,³ Truman wondered if this new weapon might "be the fire [of] destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous ark." Such apocalyptic visions, however, did not keep him from using what he recognized was "the most terrible bomb in the history of the world." Perhaps he reassured himself with the observation that "it seems the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful."

On July 17, still without knowing any details about the bomb test, Truman met for the first time with Stalin. In his diary account of that meeting he noted that the Soviet leader's agenda items, which included the overthrow of Franco's fascist government in Spain, were "dynamite." To this observation Truman added: "but I have some dynamite too which I'm not exploding now." Whether or not he was thinking of the bomb as his diplomatic dynamite is unclear.

But Truman then makes a very clear statement that goes to the heart of the issue of the bomb's necessity. Referring to the Soviet commitment to declare war on Japan three months after the defeat of Germany, Truman noted Stalin's reaffirmation of the agreement he had made with Roosevelt at Yalta: "He'll [Stalin] be in Jap War on August 15th." To this Truman added: "Fini Japs when that comes about." In these two brief sentences Truman set forth his understanding of how the war would end: Soviet entry into the war would finish the Japanese.

In writing to his wife the following day (July 18), the president underscored the importance of Soviet entry and its impact upon the timing of the war's end. "I've gotten what I came for—Stalin goes to war on August

15 with no strings on it.... I'll say that we'll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won't be killed! That is the important thing."

The implications of these passages from Truman's diary and letters for the orthodox defense of the bomb's use are devastating: if Soviet entry alone would end the war before an invasion of Japan, the use of atomic bombs cannot be justified as the only alternative to that invasion. This does not mean, of course, that having the bomb was not useful. But it does mean that for Truman the end of the war seemed at hand; the issue was no longer when the war would end, but how and on whose terms. If he believed that the war would end with Soviet entry in mid-August, then he must have realized that if the bombs were not used before that date they might well not be used at all. This relationship between the Soviet entry, the bomb, and the end of the war is set forth in Truman's diary account for July 18. "P[ri]me M[inister Churchill] and I ate alone. Discussed Manhattan [the atomic bomb] (it is a success). Decided to tell Stalin about it. Stalin had told P.M. of telegram from Jap emperor asking for peace. Stalin also read his answer to me. It was satisfactory. [I] believe Japs will fold up before Russia comes in. I am sure they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland. I shall inform Stalin about it at an opportune time." Truman apparently believed that by using the bomb the war could be ended even before the Soviet entry. The bomb would shorten the war by days rather than months. Its use would not save hundreds of thousands of lives—but it could save victory for the Americans. The race with the Germans had been won. It was now a race with Soviets.

Unaware of Soviet espionage, Truman assumed that Stalin did not know that such a race was underway. Despite his stated intention to tell Stalin about the bomb at an "opportune" time, Truman—apparently due to the urgings of Churchill and Byrnes—did not inform Stalin even of the bomb's existence, much less of the plans to use it on the eve of a major Soviet military offensive into Manchuria.

We now know that Klaus Fuchs, among others, kept Stalin well informed about progress on the bomb. But at Potsdam Truman believed he had succeeded in keeping Stalin in ignorance by a carefully staged charade, casually mentioning a "new weapon" without giving any details

3. A full report, including vivid eye-witness accounts, arrived on the afternoon of July 21.

about it or its immediate use. Stalin showed no interest, and Truman was convinced he had fooled "Mr. Russia." The following day the order to deliver both bombs as soon as possible went out from Potsdam.

This cat-and-mouse game between the two leaders was apparently what the president had in mind when, in a letter to his wife at the end of the conference, Truman, an ardent poker player, commented on Stalin's stalling tactics: "He doesn't know it but I have an ace in the hole and another one showing—so unless he has two pairs (and I know he has not) we are sitting all right."

It can be argued that ending the war sooner rather than later, even a few days later, by whatever means at his disposal was Truman's first responsibility. It also can be argued that limiting Soviet expansion in Asia, as a bonus to ending the war as soon as possible, was in the U.S. national interest and therefore also Truman's duty. But the point here is that the president, in justifying his use of the bomb, never made those arguments.

It is in this light that the new evidence, in both the Potsdam diary and letters to his wife, calls for a reevaluation of the old issue: why were the only two bombs available used in rapid succession so soon after testing, and on the eve of the planned Soviet entry into the war? From this unique record, in Truman's own hand, we can understand better how this relatively inexperienced leader, who had only recently first heard the words "atomic bomb," grasped this new technology, and used it as a solution for a multitude of military, political, and diplomatic problems.

The evidence of the Potsdam diary and letters does not close the book on the question why the bomb was dropped. Rather, it opens it to a previously unseen page. What appears there is by no means always clear or consistent. At times it is hard to know what to make of such statements as Truman's diary entry for July 25, in which he expresses his determination to use the bomb "so that military objectives are the target and not women and children." This extraordinary comment follows a very detailed and accurate description of the effects of the bomb test. Perhaps he really did believe that Hiroshima was just a "military base."

Elsewhere in these pages Truman seems to disprove the revisionist contention that he did not want "the Russians" in the war at all. In writing to his wife on July 18 Truman made it clear that his highest priority at the

conference was getting the Soviet Union into the war against Japan. Two days later, after a "tough meeting" with Churchill and Stalin, the president noted that he had made his goals "perfectly plain" to both men: "I want the Jap War won and I want 'em both in it."

The dual objectives of assuring Soviet entry while containing Soviet expansion apparently were not contradictory to Truman. As he put it a decade later, "One of the main objectives of the Potsdam Conference [was] to get Russia in as quickly as we could and then to keep Russia out of Japan—and I did it." Although he saw the bomb as useful for ending the war before the Soviets could claim credit for the victory, Truman apparently wasn't ready to rely totally on the bomb until it was proven in combat. This lingering skepticism is revealed in his use of quotation marks in noting, on the same day he gave the bomb order, that "we 'think' we have found the way to cause a disintegration of the atom."