



Turning Point

Dropping the Bomb

AUGUST 6, 1945

MEMORANDUM

For: The President

Subject: Dropping the Bomb

I think it is very important that I should have a talk with you as soon as possible on a highly secret matter.

I mentioned it to you shortly after you took office, but have not urged it since on account of the pressure you have been under. It, however, has such a bearing on our present foreign relations and has such an important effect upon all my thinking in this field that I think you ought to know about it without much further delay.

Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson
April 24, 1945

The Case

When Truman received Stimson's note on April 24, 1945, he had been President for only 12 days. Stimson wanted to talk with Truman about the atomic bomb. The war in Europe was drawing to a close, and the President was turning his attention to ending the war with Japan and to the negotiations that would shape the postwar world. Truman met with Stimson the next day, and the information Stimson shared would significantly influence Truman's strategy for ending the war.

Truman faced a critical question: Now that the atomic bomb was almost ready, would the United States use this fearsome new weapon against Japan? Truman later insisted that he "regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used." Some others did have doubts, but the evidence available today indicates that Truman and other leading policy makers did not. The decisions they made about when and how to use the weapon, however, had major military, political, and ethical consequences for the postwar world.

The Background

Truman's meeting with Stimson gave him his first knowledge of the atomic bomb; Stimson informed him that the bomb would probably be ready within four months. Although Stimson supported using the bomb to end the war, he also pointed out serious problems that the bomb would pose for the world after the war. Chief among these were a possible atomic arms race and the danger of an atomic war. To address these challenges, Stimson proposed that Truman appoint a committee to advise him on policy regarding atomic weapons. The President took Stimson's advice, and the Interim Committee, as it was called, met in Washington on May 31.

The goal of Truman and the Interim Committee appears to have been to find the most effective way to use the bomb to shock Japan into surrendering. Even though the Russians had promised to enter the war against Japan by August 8, many American military leaders assumed that an amphibious landing on the Japanese mainland would be necessary to end the war. The cost in American lives would be high, and many believed that using the bomb could end the war without an invasion.

The Opinions

The quotes on this page represent the range of opinions about using the atomic bomb that were expressed during the summer of 1945. Stimson's statement expresses the majority opinion—that the bomb had to be used to end the war quickly and to save American lives. The other statements question the use of this new weapon.

The Options

The opinions you have read indicate that Truman had these options to consider:

1. Drop the bomb on Japanese cities to force an immediate end to the war.
2. Carry out a demonstration of the weapon to persuade Japan to surrender.
3. Launch an invasion of Japan.
4. Rely on Japan's deteriorating military situation and the entry of the Soviet Union into the war to force Japanese surrender.
5. Negotiate surrender terms acceptable to Japan and the United States.

The Decision

The Interim Committee made its decision and gave it to Truman on June 1:

The present view of the Committee was that the bomb should be used against Japan as soon as possible; that it be used on a war plant surrounded by workers' homes; and that it be used without prior warning.

—Recording Secretary R. Gordon Arneson,
from minutes taken on May 31

“In the light of the alternatives which, on a fair estimate, were open to us I believe that no man, in our position and subject to our responsibilities, holding in his hands a weapon of such possibilities for accomplishing this purpose and saving those lives, could have failed to use it and afterwards looked his countrymen in the face.”

Henry L. Stimson
Secretary of War

“I told him [Stimson] I was against it on two counts. First, the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing. Second, I hated to see our country be the first to use such a weapon.”

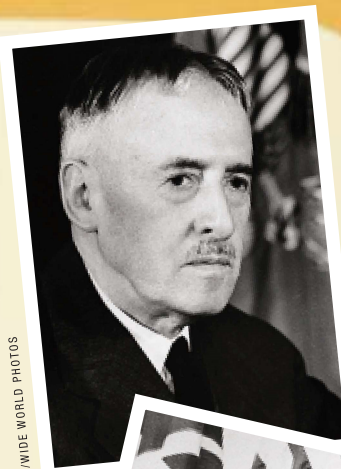
General Dwight D. Eisenhower
Supreme Allied Commander

“I have had a feeling that before the bomb is actually used against Japan that Japan should have some preliminary warning of say two or three days in advance. . . . The position of the United States as a great humanitarian nation and the fair play attitude of our people generally is responsible in the main for this feeling.”

Ralph A. Bard
Undersecretary of the Navy

“If the United States were to be the first to release this new means of indiscriminate destruction upon mankind, she would sacrifice public support throughout the world, precipitate the race for armaments, and prejudice the possibility of reaching an international agreement on the future control of such weapons.”

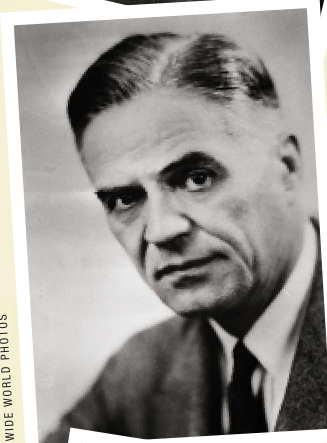
James Franck
University of Chicago



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



BROWN BROTHERS



Turning Point

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



HULTON DEUTSCH COLLECTION

Above, a column of smoke billows 20,000 feet over Hiroshima, Japan, after the first atomic bomb strike. The aftermath is shown on the left.

Secretary of State Byrnes informed the President of the Interim Committee's decision. Later, he said that "with reluctance [Truman] had to agree that he could think of no alternative and found himself in accord with what I told him the Committee was going to recommend." Why did Truman choose Option 1?

Apparently Truman rejected Option 2, a demonstration, for reasons offered by the Interim Committee and its scientific panel. A demonstration would not help to end the war. The committee did not offer evidence to support this judgment. They knew, however, that a successful test would not necessarily cause the Japanese to surrender unconditionally. An unsuccessful test, they believed, would be worse than none.

Truman placed the highest value on ending the war with the loss of as few American lives as possible. Both Options 3 and 4 would cost countless American lives and bring an indefinite extension of the war with no certain outcome. The Japanese might never surrender. They seemed prepared to fight to the end, whatever that would mean, even the

loss of many Japanese lives. Option 4 had an added disadvantage. If the Soviets entered the fighting, they would gain an advantage in postwar negotiations about new governments in Eastern Europe. Truman and other United States leaders preferred not to be indebted to the Soviets for any help in ending the war with Japan.

Truman probably never viewed Option 5 as a real possibility. The only surrender acceptable to American leaders would be unconditional. The only surrender acceptable to the Japanese would include at least one condition: that they be allowed to keep their emperor. Truman saw the bomb as just another weapon—legitimate in wartime, when the goal was to win.

The Outcome

The bomb was successfully tested on July 16, 1945, at a remote desert site near Alamogordo, New Mexico. On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb carrying more power than 20,000 tons of TNT on Hiroshima, Japan, an

important military center. The next day President Truman gave a statement that included the following: "Let there be no mistake: we shall completely destroy Japan's power to make war. Only a Japanese surrender will stop us."

Most Americans and their allies breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that the war would soon end. Yet they also recognized that, as the *London Daily Express* put it, "The world has changed overnight."

The Interpretations

More than half a century has passed since that summer in 1945. The years have brought knowledge and perspectives unavailable to Truman and other decision makers of that time. During these years three main interpretations have emerged.

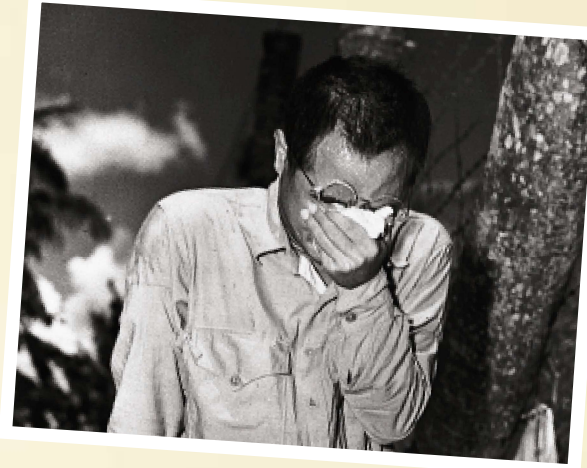
One is that Truman and Stimson were correct in their idea that the bombings were necessary to end the war and save lives. According to this view, these were the only significant motives of those who ordered the bombing of Hiroshima and, three days later, Nagasaki.

Another interpretation is that dropping the bomb was unnecessary, even immoral. People holding this view argued that while Truman and the others were honest, they were also naive; they failed to take into account the long-term effects of dropping the bomb, such as the arms race and the cold war.

A third group also saw the bombings as unnecessary and unwise. In addition, they said that Truman and the other policy makers had ulterior motives, that they engaged in "atomic diplomacy." They used the bombings to try to intimidate the Soviets. As a result, said this group, they failed to consider seriously alternatives to dropping the bomb.

Today controversy over the decision to drop the atomic bomb continues. As time passes new evidence becomes available. For example, the first viewpoint found support in later evidence from Japan that seemed to show that without the bombings the war might have continued for many months. Such findings support the often repeated but much challenged idea that the bombings saved as many as 1 million American lives.

Another source of new evidence has been medical reports about those who survived the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many sickened and



UPI/BETTMANN

A Japanese prisoner of war weeps at the news of Japan's surrender.

died soon afterward. Over the years more evidence has emerged about long-term effects of atomic radiation. Today, for example, survivors of the bombings have a higher than average incidence of leukemia and thyroid cancer. Thus medical reports about survivors add to the evidence used by those who raise ethical questions about the bomb.

RESPONDING TO THE CASE

1. Look again at the opinions of Henry L. Stimson and James Franck and contrast their predictions of the consequences of using the bomb. Why do you think they differed so much?
2. Which consequences of using the bomb did Truman predict correctly? Which were different from what he might have expected?
3. Some scientists were more likely than political leaders to oppose the use of the atomic bomb. What could account for these differences?
4. What conflicts in values did you discover as you read the quotations on page 517? Have our values as Americans changed over time, giving new meanings to the events of the 1940s?



Even today, more than 50 years after the bombing of Hiroshima, many people still debate whether the bombing should have taken place. Write down your opinion and your reasoning, and place your work in your portfolio.