

Chapter 23

Why Did Truman Drop the Bomb?

In his 1955 memoirs, Harry Truman devoted only a few pages to his decision to drop an atom bomb on the city of Hiroshima.

"I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used," wrote Truman. "The top military advisers to the President recommended its use, and when I talked to Churchill he unhesitatingly told me that he favored the use of the atom bomb if it might aid to end the war."

To end the war: this was Truman's clear and succinct rationale for using the bomb. Its devastating strength would convince the Japanese that an unconditional surrender was their only option, thus saving the lives of the American soldiers who would otherwise have to force that surrender on Japan's home ground. General Marshall had told him that an invasion might cost half a million American lives, Truman added.

Truman's secretary of war, Henry Stimson, wrote a somewhat lengthier defense of the deci-

sion to drop the bomb. Published in the February 1947 issue of *Harper's* magazine, Stimson's article recounted his activities as the chief adviser on atomic policy to both Franklin Roosevelt and Truman. In April 1945, as scientists prepared the bomb's final testing, Truman appointed Stimson head of a committee to consider the scientific, political, and military aspects of the bomb. In June, the committee recommended using the bomb as soon as possible. The committee reported that scientists could envision ^(no) technical demonstration, such as dropping a bomb over a deserted island, that would convince the Japanese of its power.

On July 26, after meeting with Churchill and Stalin at Potsdam, a suburb of Berlin, Truman issued an ultimatum to the Japanese. This came to be known as the Potsdam Proclamation. Though it didn't mention the atom bomb specifically, the Proclamation warned Japan that it must surrender or face "prompt and utter destruction." Two days later, the Japanese premier responded that the ultimatum was "unworthy of public notice." That left Truman with no choice but to show he'd meant what he'd said. "For such a purpose," Stimson wrote, "the atomic bomb was an eminently suitable weapon."

From that point on, events unfolded exactly according to plan: on August 6 the first atom bomb fell on Hiroshima; on August 9 the second fell on Nagasaki; on August 14 the Japanese sur-

rendered. Truman's and Stimson's accounts of the decision-making process seemed unimpeachable; not only had they explained clearly why they'd used the bomb, but history had proved their analysis to be correct.

Yet in the fifty-plus years since Hiroshima, revisionist historians have argued that Truman's decision to use the bomb was not nearly so straightforward as his memoirs or Stimson's article indicated. Revisionists have claimed that nowhere near 500,000 Americans would have died in an invasion; that Japan was at the brink of surrender even before the bomb was dropped; that Truman knew all of this and used the bomb anyway. His motive, according to some revisionists, was not to demonstrate American power to its Japanese enemies, but to its Russian allies. By these accounts the bomb was not the final blast of World War II, but the first blast of the Cold War.

The first to question the official explanation were hardly leftists or pacifists. Among them was Admiral William Leahy, who presided over the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and was chief of staff to the commander in chief of the army and navy, serving Roosevelt in that capacity from 1942 to 1945 and Truman from 1945 to 1949. A few years after the bombs were dropped, Leahy stated: "It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war

against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender."

Dwight Eisenhower, too, went public with his doubts. He recalled telling Stimson, before the bomb was used, "of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary."

And as early as 1945, the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, an extensive and official study established by Stimson, published its findings that conventional bombing would have forced a Japanese surrender by the end of the year.

A variety of scholars have challenged Truman's contention that 500,000 Americans would have died in an invasion of Japan. They've pointed to U.S. military planning documents indicating that an initial landing on the island of Kyushu would have resulted in between 20,000 and 26,000 dead; the highest estimate found in these documents (based on a full-scale invasion of all Japan) was 46,000. Moreover, Truman himself used a variety of figures, with the 500,000 being only the latest and highest.

The debates over these numbers, however, only obscured the revisionists' main point: if the Japanese were at the brink of surrender, there need never have been an invasion — or an atom bombing.

In presenting their evidence, the revisionists turned to an unlikely source: a memo written by the leading defender of the decision to drop the bomb, Stimson himself. For though the secre-

tary of war had undeniably recommended that the bomb be dropped, his proposed draft of the ultimatum to be issued to the Japanese differed in one significant point from the final Potsdam Proclamation.

In a July 2 memo to the president, reprinted right in his *Harper's* defense of the bomb, Stimson called for the ultimatum and then added: "I personally think that if in saying this we should add that we do not exclude a constitutional monarchy under her present dynasty, it would substantially add to the chances of acceptance." In other words, if the ultimatum held out the hope that the Japanese could keep their emperor, they might be more willing to surrender.

Stimson urged Truman to clarify the surrender terms to hold out the possibility of some continuing role for the emperor. So did others, including Acting Secretary of State Grew on May 28, Admiral Leahy on June 18, the State Department in a formal recommendation on June 30, Churchill on July 18, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also on July 18. Many pointed to intercepted Japanese documents and peace feelers the Japanese had sent out to neutral countries as evidence that Japan's leaders knew they were nearing defeat and sought only to assure that the emperor would be protected. Of the major administration figures consulting with the president on the bomb, only Secretary of State James Byrnes consistently and adamantly

opposed any clarification of the surrender terms.

In the actual Potsdam Proclamation, Byrnes got his way: there was no mention of the emperor. Why did Truman go along with Byrnes — against the advice of so many of his other advisers? And why did the ultimatum not mention specifically that a new and phenomenally powerful weapon would be unleashed on Japan's cities? Wouldn't this, too, have made Japan's surrender more likely?

To some revisionists, the answer to these questions was clear; dropping the bomb was a show of force aimed not at Japan but at Russia. As further support for this thesis, revisionists noted the difference between Truman's behavior toward the Russians before and at Potsdam. Prior to the Potsdam meeting between Truman, Churchill, and Stalin, American policy had been aimed at getting Russia to go to war with Japan. On numerous occasions Truman stated that this was the primary reason he wanted to meet Stalin at Potsdam. In this, he succeeded: Stalin agreed that by the middle of August he'd declare war on Japan. In a letter home to his wife, Truman gloated: "I've gotten what I came for — Stalin goes to war . . . I'll say that we'll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won't be killed!"

But on July 16, once Truman received word that the atom bomb had been successfully tested in the New Mexico desert, American strategy suddenly changed. No longer did the president

see any need for Russian help against the Japanese; no longer, in fact, did he see Russia as a wartime ally. In his mind, the Communists were now a postwar rival to be kept out of Japan and anywhere else. On July 17, Byrnes rejected Stimson's advice about including assurances about the emperor in the Potsdam Proclamation. The same day, the newly aggressive Truman faced Stalin across the Potsdam conference table and dismissed the latter's demand for bases in Turkey and the Mediterranean.

As Churchill put it, upon being told of the successful test of the bomb: "Now I know what happened to Truman yesterday. When he got to the meeting after having read this report he was a changed man. He told the Russians just where they got on and off and generally bossed the whole meeting."

The revisionist claims did not go unchallenged. Defenders of the orthodox explanation of the decision countered by arguing that Japan's peace feelers and other evidence that they might consider surrendering were a far cry from an actual surrender, and that the Japanese cabinet was at best divided on the subject. Others pointed out that even if the 500,000 figure was inflated, the cost of an invasion of Japan's home islands would still be considerable. At Okinawa, the equivalent of just three Japanese divisions had held out for one hundred days against a much larger U.S. ground force that was sup-

ported by heavy naval and air bombardment. The Okinawa campaign had left 12,520 Americans dead and another 36,631 injured and, along with kamikaze suicide raids, had left American soldiers and policy makers alike with a very vivid image of the ferocity of Japanese resistance. Under these circumstances, any American president would have to be concerned about the casualties an invasion would bring.

As for the decision not to mention the emperor in the Potsdam Proclamation, Truman may have felt bound by American public opinion. Since Pearl Harbor, Americans had sought revenge; to settle for anything less than unconditional surrender would have seemed a failure of nerve or will. Ironically, dropping the bomb may very well have allowed Truman to offer the surrender terms he couldn't beforehand. With America's mastery so completely established, he could let the emperor stay on. Hirohito remained the titular head of the Japanese nation until his death in 1989.

The debate over the bomb came to a head in 1994 when the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., prepared an exhibit commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing. The projected exhibition was fairly evenhanded: it stated that the war *might* have ended without the bombings if the Potsdam Proclamation had guaranteed the emperor's position, but this was by no means a strong revisionist position. Still, it was too strong

for organizations like the American Legion, whose protests led the Smithsonian to remove any text from the exhibit. Instead, the *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the bomb, was displayed without any explanation or context.

That veterans' organizations were so offended by the exhibit is ironic, given that top military leaders such as Marshall, Eisenhower, and Leahy were among the earliest to argue against the bomb's necessity. Indeed, the veterans' organizations didn't seem to realize that their insistence that the bomb had won the war shifted the credit for that victory away from their own heroic-efforts. But all this was lost in a debate that had become so politicized that the traditionalists could only see the revisionists as unpatriotic, and the revisionists could only see the traditionalists as callous and immoral.

What extremists on both sides have too often lost sight of is that the traditionalist and revisionist positions aren't irreconcilable. The traditionalists' claim that the bomb was dropped *solely* to save American lives was untrue — but that doesn't mean that saving lives wasn't a major concern. Conversely, though revisionists have demonstrated Truman's decision was made with an eye on Russia as well as Japan, that certainly doesn't mean he dropped the bomb *solely* to position America for the Cold War.

Truman did not drop the bomb for any single reason, traditionalist or revisionist. Many factors pushed him toward his decision — a desire to

avenge Pearl Harbor and an ignorance of the bomb's full dangers, to name two more. For an inexperienced and as yet unelected president, the sheer momentum of a \$2-billion project must also have been difficult to resist. "He was like a little boy on a toboggan," recalled Major General Leslie Groves, who headed up the project to build the bomb.

Might he have changed course? Perhaps. There were certainly opportunities. But the forces pushing that toboggan downward were very powerful indeed.

*** To investigate further:**

Stimson, Henry. "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb." *Harper's* magazine, February 1947. Written by Truman's secretary of war, this was one of the earliest and most influential of the official explanations.

Truman, Harry. *Memoirs*. New York: Doubleday, 1955. Volume One includes Truman's own account of his decision.

Sherwin, Martin. *A World Destroyed*. New York: Knopf, 1975. An account of the interaction between scientists and policymakers and of the origins of the arms race prior to the end of World War II.

Wyden, Peter. *Day One*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984. An excellent general history of the bomb, before and after Hiroshima.

McCullough, David. *Truman*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. A masterful biography.