THE FLETCHER FORUM OF WORLD AFFAIRS

Volume 19
Number 2

Summer/Fall 1995
$8.00

ALTERNATIVES TO MILITARY INTERVENTION?

The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy

42

0 74470 84438 9

TRUMAN'S BOMB, OUR BOMB[1]

CASEY FRANK

We Hold All Earth To Plunder
All Time And Space As Well
Too Wonder-Stale To Wonder
At Each New Miracle.

Then, In The Mid-Illusion
Of God-Head In Our Hand
Falls Multiple Confusion
On All We Thought Or Planned
The Mighty Works We Planned.

The Hymn of Breaking Strain
Rudyard Kipling

While President Truman met with Churchill and Stalin to decide the shape of the post-war world, the first atomic bomb exploded above the New Mexico desert on 16 July 1945.[2] Nine days later, Truman sat in his office in Potsdam and made the fateful decision that was his alone. He wrote matter of factly in his diary: "This weapon is to be used between now and August 10th. I have told the Secretary of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children."[3] Regrettably, the ratio of civilians to military personnel in Hiroshima was actually six to one.[4]

The United States did not drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki primarily to end World War II without invading Japan, nor to threaten the Soviet Union at the threshold of the Cold War. Far from being a calculated, strategic decision, the use of the atomic bomb ("the Bomb"[5]) was brought about by the

---

[2] Samuel Glasstone & Philip J. Dolan, editors, *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Defense & U.S. Dept. of Energy, 1977), 39.

[3] Robert H. Ferrell, editor, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S Truman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 55.

[4] Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 713.

[5] It is referred to in the singular since Truman made but one decision that unleashed bombs on both Hiroshima and Nagasaki. David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 457.

Attorney Casey Frank writes and lectures frequently on political and legal topics. His Boston-based practice includes bioethics, health care, and disability issues. *This article was greatly improved by the critical comments of Abbie Levin, Peter Greulich, Ken Kraft, Tom Roberts, Sam and Irene Frank, and Ven. Philip Kapleau.*

personal impulses evoked in President Truman by the presidency into which he had suddenly been thrust, and by the warfighting mentality that reigned as a result of years of death and destruction. From this convergence emerged an implacable determination to end the war.

To understand why Truman acted as he did, it is necessary to recall how the pre-atomic events of the war lent an irresistible urgency to his decisions. More importantly, one must view the complex political panorama Truman beheld. In the shadow of his powerful predecessor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Truman was unable to act in the objective manner which events merited. The military and political momentum inherited from Roosevelt carried him inescapably to the war's atomic conclusion. Further, the persistent alienation between Eastern and Western cultures and the insistence on unconditional surrender provided powerful added incentives to use the Bomb. The consequences have since preoccupied the United States[6] and continue to threaten the world through nuclear proliferation.[7]

A critical exploration of these events, however, must be tempered. Even if the Bomb was not necessary to avoid an invasion of Japan itself and eventually end the war, it nevertheless saved many lives—those of soldiers fighting on many other battlefields in the Pacific Theater, Allied prisoners of war, and Japanese civilians. Truman did not create the Bomb or determine the end-stage events of the war; he inherited the overwhelming rage and war-weariness of a world that had suffered too much, and he responded accordingly. Presidents reflect the collective aspirations of their people, and in the summer of 1945, the American people demanded an end to war by all available means—including the Bomb.

The War Still Raged in the Pacific

When Harry S Truman became president on 12 April 1945, the nation had been at war since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941,[8] and Great Britain and France had been at war since 3 September 1939.[9] Tens of millions of people had died, and millions more were still engaged in combat around the world. The war in Europe was nearing its end, even as the first signs of the Cold War materialized. France had been liberated, Allied troops crossed the Elbe River only sixty miles from Berlin on Truman's inauguration day,[10] and Vienna fell the day after.[11] Although Goebbels reported reaction to the news of Roosevelt's death was, "Bring out our best champagne!"[12] this response was decidedly premature. In fact, heavy Russian artillery was already landing

---

[6] Gar Alperovitz and Kai Bird, "The Centrality of the Bomb," *Foreign Policy* (Spring, 1994), 3.

[7] Chris Hedges, "Iran May Be Able to Build an Atomic Bomb in 5 Years, U.S. and Israeli Officials Fear," *New York Times*, 5 January 1995, A5.

[8] Gordon Prange, *At Dawn We Slept* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 558.

[9] William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 597-622.

[10] Ibid., 1105.

[11] Ibid., 1106.

[12] Ibid., 1110.

within earshot of Hitler's command bunker, and both Hitler and Mussolini would be dead within the month.[13]

In the Pacific Theater, U.S. forces had reached Okinawa, just 340 miles from Japan. This invasion proved the costliest of the Pacific war, with over 49,000 American casualties and 220,000 Japanese deaths.[14] This was the final assault before any possible invasion of Japan itself and was the most reliable preview of the fighting to come. A powerful fear of Japanese military prowess was undoubtedly warranted. Notably, not a single Japanese unit had surrendered during the entire war.[15] According to U.S. Army intelligence, when Japan surrendered it still had 3,575,323 combat troops fighting in twenty-two different arenas, from Manchuria and Korea to New Guinea and Thailand.[16] In addition, Japan still possessed 3,655,000 combat-equipped troops in the home islands,[17] with 9,000 kamikaze airplanes under preparation at secret inland bases.[18]

After capturing the Marianas Islands on 9 March 1945 and attaining the requisite air bases, air power became the foundation of Allied plans for the destruction of Japan.[19] A naval blockade circled the country, effectively cutting off critical imports, most importantly oil.[20] Cities were bombed to destroy factories and military installations, kill munitions workers, and create fear and disillusionment within the civilian population. This indiscriminate, total warfare had developed as an integral aspect of the European war. The bombing of Germany served as the model for strategic planning in the Pacific Theater and led to an emphasis on airborne military solutions.[21]

The fact that German war production rose through 1944[22] is often cited to refute the value of strategic bombing. However, the victims of those bombings had little doubt as to their impact. According to Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring, "Allied air power was the greatest single reason for the German defeat."[23] Finance Minister Hjalman Schacht was even more blunt, asserting that: "Germany lost the war the day it started. [Allied] bombers destroyed production, and Allied production made the defeat of Germany certain."[24] In Japan, the

---

[13] Ibid., 1131-1134.

[14] Stephen Harper, *Miracle of Deliverance* (New York: Stein & Day, 1986), 55.

[15] McCullough, 438.

[16] Douglas MacArthur, *Reports of General MacArthur* (prepared by his General Staff), v. II, Part 2 (Washington, DC: U.S. G.P.O., 1966), 753.

[17] Ibid., 752.

[18] David MacIsaac, "Japan's Struggle to end the War, July 1, 1946," *United States Strategic Bombing Survey* (New York: Garland Pub., 1976), 1.

[19] Edwin Hoyt, *How They Won The War In The Pacific: Nimitz And His Admirals* (New York: Weybright & Talley, 1970), 373.

[20] P.M.S. Blackett, *Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy* (London: Turnstile Press, 1948), 135.

[21] The U.S. preference for aerial operations continues, demonstrated most recently during the war in the Persian Gulf in 1991, in which the multinational force led by the United States waged war from the air for thirty-eight days, and on the ground for four days. Dilip Hiro, *Desert Shield to Desert Storm* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 320, 378.

[22] Max Hastings, *Bomber Command* (New York: Dial Press, 1979), 370.

[23] Dudley Saward, *Victory Denied: The Rise of Air Power and the Defeat of Germany* (New York: F. Watts, 1987), 363.

[24] Ibid.

emperors personal envoy, Prince Konoye Fumimaro, stated, "Fundamentally the thing that brought about the determination to make peace was the prolonged bombing by the B-29s."[25]

Moderation was not a dominant virtue at this point in the war. The U.S. Army's own history states, "To a very large extent, American planning for this last stage of the war was dominated by an overestimation of Japanese ability and will to resist."[26] On 14 August 1945, the day before the final Japanese surrender, 1,000 carrier-based planes bombed Tokyo—five days after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki.[27] The Allies had become numb to the mass killing of civilians. Their moral sense, their ability to discern the necessary from the gratuitous, had gradually atrophied over the course of the war. Although in 1939 Roosevelt claimed that bombing civilians was "inhuman barbarism,"[28] by 1945 there was apparently little such sentiment left in the hearts of Allied leaders.

Over four million Americans were still serving overseas, about two-thirds in Europe and one-third in the Pacific Theater. Every day more American soldiers were dying on two different continents far from home, and by the end of the war almost one million Americans would be killed or wounded. In this atmosphere, on 18 June 1945, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff set the stage for the final strategy against Japan; they intensified aerial bombing, and prepared for a possible invasion of Japan in November.[29] Over 900,000 U.S. troops were set for redeployment to fight the Japanese.[30]

The thought of continued casualties must have been unbearable, and surely fueled the developments leading to the Bomb. War-torn populations everywhere wanted the fighting to end, and in the United States there was pointed public sentiment for bringing U.S. troops home.[31] This drive dominated Truman individually, and the world collectively. Its momentum would brook no deviation from the goal of peace, and admit no compromise from the practice of total aerial warfare. Truman had his finger on the nuclear trigger, but Washington and the world had its hand on Truman's finger.

Truman Struggles with FDR's Washington

Truman became president on 12 April 1945, after serving only eighty-two days as vice president, and faced a role for which he was unprepared. Roosevelt had done almost nothing to pave the way for his successor. Truman later wrote to his daughter: "[Roosevelt] never did talk to me confidentially about the war,

---

[25] Ibid., 366.

[26] Richard M. Leighton, editor, *Global Logistics and Strategy*, v. II (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1955-1968), 815.

[27] MacArthur, v. I, 442.

[28] McCullough, 392-393.

[29] Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey, *No High Ground* (New York: Harper, 1960), 108.

[30] Leighton, 586.

[31] Henry Stimson & McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in War & Peace* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), 632.

or about foreign affairs, or what he had in mind for the peace after the war."[32] Not once had Truman been in the White House Map Room to review battle strategy, nor had he ever met the U.S. Secretary of State.[33] Truman first learned of the Bomb's existence thirteen days after he became president.[34] Roosevelt had left behind no written guidance regarding the use of the Bomb except for a brief agreement with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill from the previous year stating that the Bomb "might perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese, who should be warned that this bombardment will be repeated until they surrender."[35]

A presidency of such length and influence as Roosevelt's had perpetuated an aura of personal dominance that no one could have matched. As Washington journalist Hugh Sidney expressed it: "Franklin Roosevelt still owned Washington. His ideas prevailed. His era endured. The government that functioned at that time was his creation perhaps more than any other single man."[36]

The ambivalence that Truman felt towards his predecessor was intense. It was difficult to earn the trust of those around him.[37] When Truman called the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to inform them of the presidential appointment of a loan official, he was asked if the president had made the appointment before he died. Truman snapped, "He made it now."[38] Even Truman himself, months after his inauguration in a letter to Mrs. Roosevelt, referred to Roosevelt as "the only one I ever think of as president."[39]

Truman's frustration with Roosevelt's legacy could also take a more assertive form. According to aide Jonathan Daniels, who served under both Presidents: "In Roosevelt's chair he made no image of the great prince which Roosevelt, even in his lightest moments was to those around him. Sometimes Truman seemed almost deliberately to shatter such an image by use of a barnyard vocabulary."[40] Rather than showing real inner confidence, Truman's behavior seems to demonstrate a genuine need to establish his own identity.

More importantly, news of Truman's ascent to the presidency greatly depressed Generals Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton, who doubted his qualifications relative to Roosevelt's.[41] Truman probably felt that he had much to prove to the military staff. Although Truman had supporters, both in Washington and in his home state of Missouri, they represented the minority view.[42]

---

[32] William Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 6.

[33] Ibid.

[34] McCullough, 376-377.

[35] Ibid., 379.

[36] Leuchtenburg, ix.

[37] One scholar recounts the following revealing incident: "A news reel crew dispatched to record one of Truman's speeches was so exasperated by the number of retakes required that the cameraman yelled at him (President Truman), 'Senator, speak up!' As they left, Truman heard the man say in disgust, 'He ain't no Roosevelt'." Ibid., 4.

[38] McCullough, 357.

[39] Ibid., 356.

[40] Leuchtenburg, 14.

[41] McCullough, 349-350.

[42] Ibid., 350-351.

Truman tried to establish himself as the president amidst the memory of Roosevelt, the man who had not even personally invited him to join the presidential ticket.[43] At the same time, as historian William Leuchtenburg maintains, Truman "wanted desperately to be thought of as FDR's heir."[44] An expression of the gulf in stature between the two men comes from Truman's account of their first meeting in 1935, which describes it as "quite an event for a country boy to go calling on the President of the United States."[45]

Perhaps Roosevelt's most extraordinary, if unfulfilled, legacy was the Manhattan Project which produced the Bomb. Two sources reveal the centrality of the Manhattan Project to Roosevelt. Truman's personal Chief of Staff, Admiral William Leahy said, "I know FDR would have used it in a minute to prove that he had not wasted 2 billion dollars."[46] Roosevelt's unequivocal intentions were expressed by Secretary of War Henry Stimson when he stated, "At no time, from 1941 to 1945, did I ever hear it suggested by the President, or by any other responsible member of the government, that atomic energy should not be used in the war."[47] There was no evidence implying that Roosevelt would not have used the Bomb.

Truman made the decision to drop the Bomb while at Potsdam, following a week traveling the Atlantic and working with Secretary of State James Byrnes, Chief of Staff Admiral Leahy, and Russian specialist and interpreter Chip Bohlen—all of whom had been at the last summit meeting with Roosevelt at Yalta.[48] Truman thus reached his conclusion amidst the former Roosevelt entourage; he sat in Roosevelt's chair, surrounded by Roosevelt's Court, addressing the enterprise initiated by Roosevelt.

How could Truman *not* have used the Bomb? To discard the fruits of the Manhattan Project would have been a fundamental repudiation of his mentor and what he had stood for, a step difficult to reconcile with Truman's nascent presidential powers. On the other hand, the way for Truman to assert himself against the tug of Roosevelt's legacy was to take charge of the Bomb. This is the essential element for understanding Truman's actions. Either compliance with or defiance of Roosevelt led Truman to the Bomb.

Truman made his decision after rejecting some authoritative, though minority, opposition to the Bomb. General Dwight D. Eisenhower told Truman at Potsdam that he disagreed with the plan to use the Bomb. Earlier Eisenhower had told Secretary of War Stimson of his concerns in no uncertain terms: "I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary."[49] Admiral Leahy also had unequivocal feelings against the use of the

---

[43] Leuchtenburg, 6.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Walter Schoenberger, *Decision Of Destiny* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1970), 108.

[46] Leuchtenburg, 10.

[47] Stimson, 613.

[48] McCullough, 409.

[49] Alfred D. Chandler, editor, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, Occupation, 1945: VI* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 205.

Bomb. He later wrote: "It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender."[50] Leahy's unequivocal attitude and authoritative position as Truman's Chief of Staff is perhaps the most damning testimony against the popular notion that the United States used the Bomb in order to avoid a costly invasion of Japan.

Others also had doubts about using the Bomb, including General Hap Arnold and Admiral Lewis Strauss. However, most of the negative sentiments were in the form of reservations, not clear and emphatic opposition. Aligned in favor of the Bomb's use were Secretary Stimson, Secretary of State Byrnes, former Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, General Leslie Groves (head of the Manhattan project), seven of eight members of the Interim Committee appointed to advise on the use of the Bomb,[51] and many scientists, including J. Robert Oppenheimer, the chief scientist for the project.[52] Leo Szilard and sixty-eight other scientists petitioned Truman the day after the Bomb was first tested, emphatically urging restraint.[53] However, this petition was apparently never read by Truman, having been held by Secretary Stimson until after the end of the war.[54]

Ultimately, the decision was Truman's alone, though his impulse to use the Bomb was driven by the political and military dynamic in which he found himself. A sober analysis of nuclear war was unfeasible amid the fast pace of events. The global goal of peace consumed the nation and the world and superseded all other considerations. As leader of the most powerful member of the Allies, Truman reached his conclusions on behalf of millions of people, and guided us all on the road to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Racial Alienation and the Pacific Theater

Oh East Is East, And West Is West,
And Never The Twain Shall Meet,
Till Earth And Sky Stand Presently,
At God's Great Judgment Seat.

But There Is Neither East Nor West, Border,
Nor Breed, Nor Birth,
When Two Strong Men Stand Face To Face,
Though They Come From The Ends Of The Earth!

The Ballad of East & West
Rudyard Kipling

---

[50] William D. Leahy, *I Was There* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1950), 441.

[51] McCullough, 390-397.

[52] Knebel and Bailey, 123.

[53] Spencer R. Weart and Gertrude Weiss Szilard, editors, *Leo Szilard: His Version of the Facts* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1978), 211-212.

[54] Helen Caldicott, *Missile Envy* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1986), 66.

Racial alienation laid the foundation for the war both in Europe and in the Pacific. Hitler's pathological obsession was to create a pure Aryan race. In East Asia, the war was the outcome of a long process of conflict and colonialism, traceable to the time when Europeans first sailed the oceans. The forced opening of Japan in 1853 by U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry,[55] British annexation of Hong Kong and occupation of China in the nineteenth century,[56] and French and American involvement in Indochina[57] are all noteworthy examples of the history of this conflict.

The exploitative aspirations of colonialist Europeans and the profoundly different cultures they encountered bred a violent disrespect for their colonial subjects, the ramifications of which still afflict the world. Historian Hannah Arendt described race as "the emergency explanation of human beings whom no European or civilized man could understand."[58] This pervasive force, as it was manifested in Asia, surely had a significant effect on the conduct of the war.

Another source of disharmony in Japanese-U.S. relations was the profound difference in languages. When the Japanese received the Potsdam Declaration on 26 July 1945, which called for their unconditional surrender, Prime Minister Suzuki's response to Truman was misinterpreted. "The Potsdam Proclamation," stated Suzuki, "in my opinion, is just a rehash of the Cairo Declaration, and therefore the government does not consider it of great importance. We must *mokusatsu* it." Although the term *mokusatsu* literally means "to kill with silence," Suzuki employed it with the connotation of the English "no comment." The phrase was instead translated to Truman as "treat with silent contempt."[59]

January 1945 public opinion polls on U.S. attitudes towards Japanese and Germans revealed a cultural disparity out of proportion to wartime reality. When asked, "Who is our chief enemy?" only a third named the Germans, while a majority named the Japanese. When asked, "Who are the people who will always want war?" 29 percent said the Germans, and 53 percent named the Japanese. Leniency for the German people was favored by 64 percent, but only by 40 percent for the Japanese.[60]

Of course, animosity towards the Japanese was not unique to the general public or to Americans. British General William Slim, who accepted the surrender of the Japanese in Southeast Asia, showed the pervasive gulf between East and West when he stated:

---

[55] David Bergamini, *Japans Imperial Conspiracy* (New York: Morrow, 1971), 6.

[56] Stewart Easton, *The Rise and Fall of Western Colonialism* (New York: F.A.Praeger, 1964), 14.

[57] Thomas Boettcher, *Vietnam: The Valor And The Sorrow* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985), 7.

[58] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 185.

[59] John Toland, *The Rising Sun* (New York: Random House, 1970), 774. A more recent version of this same phenomenon occurred during an exchange between Prime Minister Eisaku Sato and President Nixon in 1969. Sato came to Washington to calm down U.S. anger over a flood of Japanese textile imports. When Nixon bluntly called for Japanese restraint, Sato looked ceilingward and replied "*zensho shimasu*," which literally means "I will do my best," and so it was translated to Nixon. What it really means is a polite "forget it." Nixon judged Sato to be a liar when no changes were forthcoming. Clyde Haberman, "Some Japanese (One) Urge Plain Speaking," *New York Times*, 27 March 1988, 3.

[60] Harry H. Field, *American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (Denver: National Opinion Research Center, January, 1945), 29-36.

> I looked at the dull, impassive faces of the Japanese Generals and Admirals opposite. Their plight moved me not at all. I had none of the sympathy for soldier to soldier I had felt for Germans, Turks, Italians, or Frenchman that by fortune of war I had seen surrender. I knew too well what these men and those under their orders had done to their prisoners. They sat here apart from humanity.[61]

Relations between Japanese-Americans and their fellow citizens deteriorated during the strains of wartime, leading to the internment of 110,000 U.S. citizens of Japanese descent living on the west coast of the United States in 1942.[62] This monolithic treatment of a distinct class of people is a hallmark of racism. The supposition that all Americans of Japanese descent would act treasonably reflects the ideological rigidity which reigned during the war. Cultural alienation was further compounded by the unique shock of Pearl Harbor. That attack was not preceded by a declaration of war, and was underway for thirty-five minutes before two Japanese envoys were ushered into the Office of the U.S. Secretary of State with the official declaration of war.[63]

In reality, there were heroic Japanese whose altruistic actions are only now coming to light. Chuine Sugihara, the Japanese Counsel General in Lithuania, saved the lives of perhaps 10,000 Jews. He used his diplomatic offices to issue transit visas allowing Jews to escape in the fashion of Raoul Wallenberg.[64] It is revealing that our society has been much quicker to recognize the valiant acts of the Swedish Wallenberg and the German Oskar Schindler. It has taken fifty years for Sugihara to receive the adulation he deserves because his story conflicts with the image of total evil Americans subscribed to and have maintained about the Japanese of that time. This attitude helps justify U.S. use of the Bomb and prevents the United States from coming to grips with an episode which still haunts its national psyche.

Racial antipathy is also a recurring theme in Japanese thought. Emperor Komei reminded the Shogun in 1864 that "the subjugation of the ugly barbarian [all non-Japanese] is our nation's first priority, and we must raise an army to chastise and overawe them."[65] One authority concluded that, for the Japanese, war is basically defined as all conflict which is interracial.[66] More broadly, the renowned scholar on Japan, Edwin O. Reischauer, regards Japan—even today—as having the world's strongest sense of racial uniqueness.[67] This orientation must surely have influenced Japanese actions in World War II.

---

[61] Harper, 179.

[62] Morton Grodzins, *Americans Betrayed, Politics and the Japanese Evacuation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (Washington, DC: U.S. G.P.O., 1983).

[63] Harper, 27.

[64] Hillel Levin, "Sugihara's List," *New York Times*, 20 September 1994, A17; Hillel Levin, *In Pursuit of Sugihara: The Banality of Good* (to be published).

[65] Michael Montgomery, *Imperialist Japan: The Yen to Dominate* (London: Christopher Helm, 1987), 56.

[66] Peter N. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 45.

[67] Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese Today* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 396-397.

This gulf between East and West likely affected Truman. He was the product of his culture, one which possessed little understanding of Japan. As a young man, in a letter to his future wife, Bess, Truman displayed an all too common attitude towards Asians. Referring to his uncle Will Young, Truman said: "He does hate Chinks and Japs. So do I."[68]

For Truman and Americans collectively, racial antipathy made it easier to think of Hiroshima as a military target rather than as a city. Urgency generated by years of war strengthened this attitude, and it was brought into sharper focus by the imminent end of hostilities in Europe. By the time Germany fell, the world was war-weary, and the Pacific Theater inherited an intense longing for an end to the fighting. The stage was thus set for the atomic apocalypse. Onto this stage stepped Truman, having never seen a script for the part he had won.

U.S.-U.S.S.R. Ambivalence

Another concern at the time was the deteriorating relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States. Both countries were resuming the mutually antagonistic stance which prevailed before their collaboration in the defeat of Germany and Japan. George Kennan, then deputy to Ambassador Averell Harriman in Moscow, has written passionately about the despair felt by diplomatic and military leaders as the Soviet Union seized previously independent countries in Eastern Europe as the war ended.[69]

Naturally, the Bomb was relevant to foreign policy towards the Soviet Union, just as the U.S. nuclear arsenal continues to be. Secretary Stimson called the Bomb "the master card" of diplomacy,[70] and Secretary of State James Byrnes asserted, "After [the] atomic bomb Japan will surrender and Russia will not get in so much on the kill."[71]

Yet, there is no evidence that in the absence of the Soviet threat Truman would not have used the Bomb. Storm clouds were on the horizon, but the Allies were still trying to find common ground. As Truman wrote in his diary, "There were many reasons for my going to Potsdam, but the most urgent in my mind was to get from Stalin a personal reaffirmation of Russia's entry into the war against Japan, a matter which our military chiefs are most anxious to clinch."[72] Ambassador Harriman also expressed his belief that the impending Cold War was not yet a motivating factor at Potsdam, by stating: "The idea of using the bomb as a form of pressure on the Russians never entered the discussions at Potsdam. That wasn't the President's mood at all."[73]

Winston Churchill, referring to a top-level meeting with Truman, General

---

[68] McCullough, 86.

[69] George Kennan, *Nuclear Delusions* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), ix.

[70] Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 1.

[71] Ibid., 44.

[72] Harry S Truman, *Memoirs: Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 411.

[73] W. Averell Harriman and Elie Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, 1941-1946* (New York: Random House, 1975), 490.

Marshall, and Admiral Leahy, summarized the real nature of the decision at Potsdam: "The decision whether or not to use the atomic bomb to compel the surrender of Japan was never even an issue. There was unanimous, automatic, unquestioned agreement around our table; nor did I hear the slightest suggestion that we should do otherwise."[74] This meeting included at least one member, Admiral Leahy, who was personally convinced that the Bomb was not even needed to affect the surrender of Japan.

The use of atomic weapons was not considered at Potsdam due to the Bomb's uncertain future. Admiral Leahy had no confidence in the success of the Manhattan Project.[75] He assured Truman that "the damn thing" would never work.[76] When a White House meeting was held to review the possible invasion plans for Japan on 18 June 1945, the arrangements proceeded as though there was no atomic bomb.[77] When Secretary Stimson presented Truman with a comprehensive memorandum for the defeat of Japan, on 2 July 1945, the Bomb was not mentioned because "it had not yet been tested."[78] It is unlikely that the Bomb became the basis for Truman's foreign policy towards the Soviet Union in the few days between the first test of the Bomb and the decision to use it against Japan.

To the contrary, the incentive to use the Bomb emanated from the battlefields contested by Japan and the Allies, which provided plausible and sufficient reasons for the Bomb. The war still raged in the Pacific, and the forces which made it atomic arose primarily from that theater, driven by the U.S. demand for unconditional surrender.

Unconditional Surrender

Japanese overtures to surrender began at least as early as September 1944, through the Swedish Minister in Tokyo.[79] In April 1945, Shunichi Kase, the Japanese Minister to Bern, Switzerland, contacted the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S.), announcing his desire to help end the hostilities.[80] This contact, and others with the O.S.S. chief in Switzerland, Allen Dulles, were evidently never seriously taken up by a higher authority.[81] The United States also knew that there were contacts made in June 1945 by the Japanese Ambassador in Moscow.[82] All of these proposals, however, required that Emperor Hirohito's position be maintained, which conflicted with the hallowed principle of unconditional surrender.

---

[74] Winston Churchill, *The Second World War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948-53), 553.

[75] Knebel and Bailey, 73.

[76] McCullough, 397.

[77] Herbert Feis, *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 10 (citing Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy).

[78] Stimson, 624.

[79] Louis Morton, *Command Decisions; The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1990), 505.

[80] Anthony Cave Brown, *The Last Hero: Wild Bill Donovan* (New York: Times Books, 1982), 771.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, 12.

Unconditional surrender was a central tenet of Roosevelt's policy throughout the war.[83] Formally enunciated at Casablanca in 1943, it required the defeated countries to capitulate without any preconditions. Its purposes were manifold: to reassure U.S. allies of American commitment to the war; to discourage the Soviet Union from negotiating a separate peace with the Third Reich; to inflame domestic resistance within the belligerent countries; and to maintain strong pro-war public sentiment in the United States. This policy was essential in the case of Germany because Hitler would not negotiate and was determined to fight to the end.[84]

For Japan, unconditional surrender was an incendiary issue, in particular because it required the removal of Emperor Hirohito. The U.S. government knew that the Japanese were determined to keep him. In 1945, an intelligence assessment concluded that the "Japanese believe that unconditional surrender would be the equivalent of national extinction, and there are as yet no indications that they are ready to accept such terms."[85]

U.S. public opinion in 1945 showed only three percent of Americans supported Hirohito's retention, and one-third actually called for his execution.[86] However, Joseph Grew, Under Secretary of State and former U.S. Ambassador to Japan, urged Truman to retain Hirohito in May 1945,[87] as did Secretary Stimson, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, Admiral Leahy, and others in the ensuing months.[88] While Secretary of State Byrnes continued to insist on unconditional surrender, Secretary Stimson pleaded with Truman to allow the Emperor to remain as part of the final ultimatum to Japan before the Bomb (in the Potsdam Declaration).[89]

Why did Truman reject these suggestions? In his very first speech as president, he reiterated, "Our demand has been, and it remains—unconditional surrender."[90] In this policy, Truman again followed Roosevelt's lead.[91] There was some legitimate concern, expressed by Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson among others, that Emperor Hirohito so embodied Japanese political aggressions that lasting peace would not be possible without his removal from influence.[92]

In the end, Truman would not abandon the principle of unconditional surrender—until after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—because it had always been the lodestar of U.S. strategic and political planning. Over-

---

[83] McCullough, 436.

[84] A.E. Campbell, "Roosevelt And Unconditional Surrender," in *Diplomacy And Intelligence During The Second World War*, Richard Langhorne, editor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 225.

[85] Morton, 504.

[86] John Emmerson, *The Japanese Thread: Thirty Years Of Foreign Service* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 232.

[87] Stimson, 626, 628.

[88] Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, 30.

[89] McCullough, 436.

[90] Ibid., 359, 436.

[91] Thomas Fleming, "The Making of a Tragedy," *New York Times*, 19 July 1994, A17.

[92] David Bergamini, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy* (New York: Morrow, 1971), 57.

whelming public sentiment was clearly against anything which could be construed as bargaining with the devil.

The desperate deadlock within the Japanese government continued after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,[93] but the horror of it all forced Hirohito and Prime Minister Suzuki to take the decisive step to surrender.[94] The U.S. Bombing Survey later concluded that "although the atomic bombs changed no votes of the (Japanese) Supreme War Direction Council concerning the Potsdam terms, they did foreshorten the war and expedite the peace."[95]

The repugnance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki also seemed to transform the United States, which in the end allowed for terms the Japanese could live with, Emperor and all.[96] Truman remarked at a cabinet meeting on 10 August, "The thought of wiping out another 100,000 was too horrible."[97] Conspicuously, nothing had changed militarily to abolish American steadfast insistence on unconditional surrender. Only our attitudes had changed, and suddenly the war was over.

Moral Lessons

Truman had alternatives to using the Bomb. The United States knew of Japanese surrender overtures and the impending Soviet declaration of war against Japan. If U.S. insistence on unconditional surrender had been dropped sooner, the war may have been brought to a quicker and profoundly different conclusion.[98]

Was it necessary to use the Bomb to avoid a lethal invasion of Japan? Chief of Staff Admiral Leahy "was unable to see any justification for an invasion of an already defeated Japan . . . [and] feared the cost would be enormous in both lives and treasure."[99] The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey concurred that "certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the Atomic bomb had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated."[100] Admiral Halsey and General LeMay agreed.[101] Near the end of the war, Secretary Stimson stressed to Truman that Japan had no allies, navy or supplies, while the Allies had virtually inexhaustible resources and troops.[102]

---

[93] The Council vote was still three to three on the question of surrender, even after the bombing of Nagasaki. MacIsaac, 12.

[94] Stimson, 627.

[95] MacIsaac, 12.

[96] Stimson, 627.

[97] Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, 54.

[98] Stimson, 629.

[99] Ibid., 501.

[100] MacIsaac, 13.

[101] James M. Merril, *A Sailor's Admiral* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1976), 233; Curtis LeMay with Bill Yenne, *Superfortress* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 156; Alfonso A. Narvaez, "Gen. Curtis LeMay, an Architect of Strategic Air Power, Dies at 83," *New York Times*, 2 October 1990, B6.

[102] Stimson, 621-623.

Although Japan's surrender was inevitable without an invasion or atomic attack, the use of the Bomb clearly brought about a swifter end to the war, saving lives in the twenty-two battlefields outside Japan, among the hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war[103] (over 25,000 of them Americans),[104] and in the starving civilian population of Japan.[105] In fact, Secretary Stimson had contended that continued conventional bombing of Japan would be more destructive than the two atomic bombs.[106] These saved lives must temper our criticism of the Bomb.

The war had evolved to the point where it was primarily conducted by the United States without precisely defined military or political goals beyond the complete defeat of the Axis powers. It had become a fundamental struggle between good and evil. Japanese and Americans no longer viewed each other as human beings. They had lost their shared humanity. The Bomb was the ultimate expression of the alienation of the warring nations. In the words of Hannah Arendt, the belligerent parties "interpret[ed] transitory differences [between people] with a divine eternity and finality."[107] One must see the decision to use the Bomb in the context of an extended conflict, with tens of millions of casualties, the vast majority of them civilians,[108] against an alien foe who, in the eyes of the United States and its Allies, epitomized evil.

If the Bomb had a tactical military purpose with specific objectives, the most important person to be consulted as to the use of the Bomb would have been the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Army in the Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur (later designated the Supreme Allied Commander).[109] The fact that MacArthur learned of the atomic plans five days before the Bomb was dropped, after Truman's decision was made and the Bomb was in transit to Japan, demonstrates that it was not the product of a strategic, military calculation.[110] It is further revealing that the Official U.S. Army history notes, "As far as is known, the President did not solicit the views of the military or naval staffs, nor were they offered."[111]

The volatile circumstances which culminated in atomic war give one pause when contemplating the tremendous concentration of power within the hands of modern political leaders. The fog of war is accompanied by a cloud of political turbulence, where technological prowess has far outstripped the art of decision-

---

[103] Laurens Van der Post, *The Light of the New Moon* (London: Hogarth, 1970), 47.

[104] E. Bartlett Kerr, *Surrender And Survival: The Experience of American POW's in the Pacific, 1941-1945* (New York: W. Morrow, 1985), 340.

[105] "Japanese Doctor Says Bomb Averted Famine," *New York Times*, 6 August 1983, 22 (referring to Dr. Taro Takemi, President of the Japanese Medical Association for twenty-five years). There were over one million displaced persons and rice stocks were down 40 percent. Herbert Feis, *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 107. Only after Japan had decided to surrender were urgently needed supplies distributed to civilians. Lester Brooks, *Behind Japan's Surrender* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 363.

[106] Stimson, 630.

[107] Arendt, 234.

[108] Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 894.

[109] MacArthur, v. I, 389, 444.

[110] Knebel and Bailey, 73.

[111] Morton, 500.

making. When one irrational decision could mean the deaths of millions, no nation should feel secure because it maintains the means of global destruction.

Fifty years after these seminal events, the United States must come to grips with its atomic history. The recent controversies which accompanied the Smithsonian Institute's atomic bomb exhibit[112] and the Postal Service's attempted release of an atomic bomb stamp[113] demonstrate its conspicuously unresolved national feelings.

Tens of thousands of human beings lost their lives during the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The United States must take responsibility for those acts and the nuclear arms race they launched. As Ambassador Kennan said, it was "we alone, so help us God, who have used the weapon in anger against others, and against tens of thousands of helpless noncombatants at that."[114] Yet, how can we ask questions about the Bomb that we do not ask about the war as a whole? Was it moral to drop the Bomb upon Japan? If so, was it also moral for the Germans to bomb London, or the Japanese to bomb cities in China? If the use of the Bomb was not moral, was it also immoral to bomb Tokyo or Berlin? In Germany alone, years of bombing caused over one million casualties, many more than the Bomb.[115] The answers to these questions form an integral whole, for these events all involve the mass killing of civilians.

Despite the fact that the Bomb saved far more lives than it cost, the effect of the Bomb is not the same as the motives for its use. Those motives were the product of the global aspiration for peace by all available means, compounded by the pressure on Truman to follow Roosevelt's legacy.

President Truman's overall accomplishments are not lessened by a critical reappraisal of his decision to use the Bomb. Truman was a product of his time and position, and he fulfilled his duties as they were presented to him. His decision to use the Bomb expressed both the collective aspirations and alienation of a world at war.

It does not denigrate World War II veterans to admit that in retrospect an invasion of Japan was probably unnecessary to eventually end the war. It does not detract from their other heroic struggles to understand that the dropping of the Bomb resulted from political, non-strategic impulses.

That the Bomb was not necessary for Japan's eventual surrender is clear enough, but many things are clearer in hindsight. The fog of war eliminates confidence in fine distinctions, gives rise to worst case thinking, and leads to reliance on massive force. As Churchill said, "In wartime truth is so precious, it must always be attended by a bodyguard of lies."[116] Even today, fifty years later,

---

[112] Kai Bird, "The Curators Cave In," *New York Times*, 9 October 1994, 15; (Op-Ed), "Smithsonian A-bomb Display Distorts History," *New York Times*, 11 October 1994, A14.

[113] Todd Purdum, "At White House Request, Postal Service Scraps A-bomb Stamp," *New York Times*, 9 December 1994, A19.

[114] Kennan, 178.

[115] Wesley Frank Craven, editor, *The Army Air Forces in World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 801.

[116] Anthony Cave Brown, *A Bodyguard of Lies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 10.

the United States has barely begun the process of declassifying much of the information regarding the conduct of the war.[117]

The overwhelming compulsion to use the Bomb came from the political dynamic within which Truman found himself. Striving to emulate Roosevelt, desensitized by carpet bombing in Germany and Japan, provoked by the alienation between East and West, Truman, like most of his advisors, felt he had to use the Bomb. He had to use it simply because *he could not imagine doing otherwise.* We search in vain for a justification for Hiroshima and Nagasaki that matches the tremendous significance of these watershed events. There is an absurd disparity between the magnitude of cause and effect in Truman's decision. This is one of the startling ironies of the atomic age in which we live.

---

[117] Tim Weiner, "U.S. Makes Public Millions of Secret Papers," *New York Times,* 11 November 1994, A9.