

Truman's Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb Against Japan in WWII

After six years of fighting, 1945 was a year marked by several culminating events that lead to the end of World War II. In the seven month period between February and August alone were some of the most significant political events of the war – the Yalta Conference, the US presidential switch from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Harry Truman, the end of the European war, the successful test at Trinity, the Potsdam conference, Russia's declaration of war on Japan, and the dropping of two atomic bombs – one on Hiroshima and one on Nagasaki. Although looking at these events retrospectively we can put them on a neat timeline, the overlapping and fast-paced political decisions near the end of the war were much blurrier at the time. Looking back, there are still many questions we have about Truman's decision to use the atomic weapons against Japan, and these questions are more complex than simply whether dropping the bombs was the right or wrong decision. Instead, we ask, what was the United States' true motivation for using the weapons? What other options did we have? And was the decision really made by Truman? By looking over records of the events as written by historians and comparing them to Truman's and Stimson's own accounts of the events of 1945, it becomes clear that Truman actually had little involvement in the decision-making process to use the atomic bombs, and that this is the root of the other questions we still ask today. Our motivation to drop the atomic bombs was not only to save as many American lives as possible as Truman suggested, but also to gain post-war control over the Far East. In addition, there might have been alternatives to ending the war that did not involve using the atomic bombs, but Truman was not aware of these options. Despite the fact that Truman was uninformed about a great deal information

regarding the atomic bomb, the use of the bombs was still to an extent a success, because of the political aims it achieved for the United States.

By comparing outside historical accounts of the dropping of the atomic bombs to Truman's own words and recollections in his memoir and letters, it becomes clear that Truman had a limited understanding of the complexity of the issues surrounding the atomic bomb, and also gives clues as to why his recognition of the problem was so restricted. In reading the chapter in Truman's *Memoirs* about the dropping of the bombs, it is clear from the beginning that he was never informed of the back-story. When Truman writes, "The idea of the atomic bomb had been suggested to President Roosevelt by the famous and brilliant Dr. Albert Einstein, and its development turned out to be a vast undertaking," it is disconcerting because actually, the bomb had been suggested by Szilard in a letter merely signed by Einstein, and Einstein's involvement in the creation of the bomb was very limited.¹ It is not surprising that Truman made this mistake though, given the background explanation on the Manhattan Project provided by Stimson and Groves when Truman became President. Stimson said that, "I went to explain the nature of the problem to a man whose only previous knowledge of our activities was that of a Senator who had loyally accepted our assurance that the matter must be kept a secret from him."² This explains that up until that point, Truman had no idea about any part of the Manhattan Project. The ensuing discussion between Stimson, Groves and Truman should have cleared all misunderstandings though, since Stimson described how at the meeting he, "...discussed with [Truman] the whole of the project. We had with us General Groves, who explained in

¹ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs: 1945 Year of Decisions*. New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1986. Pg. 417

² Stimson, Henry Lewis. "The Decision to Use the Bomb." *Harper's Magazine*, February 1947. Pg. 5

detail the progress which had been made and the probable future course of the work.”³

However, other accounts of this session depict a much less informative briefing. “[Stimson] simply tried to apprise Truman of the perils and the opportunities presented by atomic energy. ...The meeting was only fifteen minutes in length, remarkably brief considering the complexity and importance of the subject.”⁴ Therefore it is likely that even though Truman was briefed on the atomic project, he did not hear a complete enough analysis to understand all aspects that would play into the decision to be made in the coming months.

Another reason to believe that Truman did not have a grasp of the complexity of the bombing was because he demonstrates a misunderstanding of the Allied agreement with Russia. There is a great deal of evidence of the widespread knowledge that Russia fully intended to declare war on Japan. Stimson knew about the Russian intentions to enter the war, because he listed in his 1947 article that one of the “enormously favorable factors on our side” was that “[Japan] has against her not only the Anglo-American forces but the rising forces of China and the ominous threat of Russia,” alluding to the fact that Russia would rise against Japan.⁵ Stimson’s knowledge probably came from a statement made by Stalin at the Yalta Conference in February of 1945. “Mr. [Elliott] Roosevelt writes: ‘But before the [Yalta] Conference broke up, Stalin had once more given the assurance he had first volunteered in Teheran in 1943: that, within six months of VE day, the Soviets would have declared war on Japan; then, pausing in thought, he had revised that estimate from six

³ Stimson, pg. 5

⁴ Herken, Gregg. *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War 1945-1950*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. Pg. 15-16

⁵ Stimson, pg. 11

months to three months.”⁶ Since V-E Day was on May 8, 1945, the US government absolutely should have expected the Russians to join the war against Japan sometime in mid-August. Furthermore, the reasons for Russia holding off until that time were obvious. “Russia’s policy of not entering the Japanese war till Germany was defeated was not only military common sense but part of the agreed Allied plan.”⁷ Despite the fact that, “Stalin had assured the President on the first day of the Potsdam Conference that Russia would enter the war against Japan in mid-August,” President Truman still expresses a misunderstanding of this information in his *Memoirs*.⁸ For example, he says that, “I was keeping a close watch on the Russian-Chinese negotiations. ...Stalin had said that Russia would not come into the war against Japan until she had concluded an agreement with China.”⁹ However, this is not what Stalin had said, and furthermore, it leaves out the fact that Russia had been waiting for the European war to end. Truman only partially understands the reasons for the Russian delay. The real surprise, however, comes from Truman’s own description of his reaction upon finding out that the Russians decided to enter war with Japan. He says:

Without warning, while Russian-Chinese negotiations were still far from agreement, Molotov sent for Ambassador Harriman on August 8 and announced to him that the Soviet Union would consider itself at war with Japan as of August 9. This move did not surprise us. Our dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan had forced Russia to reconsider her position in the Far East. The message from Harriman informing me of this sudden switch by the Russians reached me...and I promptly called a special press conference. ...There were only four sentences to my announcement: ‘I have a simple announcement to make. ...Russia has declared war on Japan. That is all.’¹⁰

⁶ Blackett, P.M.S. *Fear, War, and the Bomb*. New York, NY: Whittlesey House, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1949. Pg. 131-2

⁷ Blackett, pg. 135

⁸ Herken, pg. 19

⁹ Truman, pg. 425

¹⁰ Truman, pg. 425

Although Truman says that, “this move did not surprise us,” he thinks it is unsurprising because of the dropping of the atomic bomb, not because he already knew Russia would enter the war. Assuming that the bombing of Hiroshima was the sole reason that “forced Russia to reconsider her position in the Far East” demonstrates that Truman really did not understand the prior Allied agreements about Russia’s role with Japan. Furthermore, Truman refers to the Russian declaration as a “sudden switch” and is so surprised by the news that he calls a “special press conference.” Given the information available to him, Truman should not have found Russian’s declaration on August 8th surprising or seen it as a sudden switching of sides. Truman makes it even more clear that he did not know about Russia’s plans to fight against Japan by his recounting of a report made the next day by Ambassador Harriman: “When Molotov informed the British ambassador and me last evening that the Soviet Union would consider itself in a state of war with Japan as of August 9 he emphasized that...the Soviet Government had now strictly lived up to its promise to enter the Pacific War 3 months after the defeat of Germany.”¹¹ Truman again unintentionally shows that he is uninformed, as he does not appear to know that the three months is referring to the promise made by Stalin at the Yalta Conference.

In addition to not understanding the promises made between the Allies, Truman’s missing presence in Washington is further evidence that he was not fully involved in the decision to drop the bombs. He admits upon returning from Potsdam that, “It had been a month since I left the White House, and I had traveled a total of 9,346 miles.”¹² This means that Truman had been gone from the White House since around July 7th, so that for all of the major events in July and early August, including the Trinity test, the order to drop the

¹¹ Truman, pg. 425

¹² Truman, pg. 423

bombs, and the bombs themselves being dropped, he was either at sea or in Potsdam.

Truman recalls, "On August 6, the fourth day of the journey home from Potsdam, came the historic news that shook the world. I was eating lunch with members of the *Augusta's* crew when Captain Frank Graham, White House Map Room officer, handed me the...message."¹³

The fact that Truman was journeying on a boat instead of sitting in his office at the White House shows that his presence was not important to the operation of the bombings, especially given that he could have been in Washington sooner if he had flown home, the same way that Stimson travelled to and from Potsdam. After the Trinity test had proved successful, Truman says that, "Stimson flew to Potsdam the next day to see me and brought with him the full details of the test."¹⁴ It seems strange that the Secretary of War would have the opportunity to fly, while the President himself must take the slow route back to Washington. The fact that Truman was in no rush to get back to the United States when such a major event in history was about to take place shows how insignificant Truman's presence was to the ordering of the bombs being dropped and the administration following through with the pre-assigned actions.

Paradoxically, Truman's repeated insistence in his writing that he is the one who made the decision to use the bombs emphasizes further how Truman was not a part of the decision. He reiterates that he was the one to make the decision so many times that it sounds unnatural and as though he needs to maintain his authority as President by defending the actions that were carried out under his name. Not only does he stress in his *Memoirs* that, "The final decision of where and when to use the atomic bomb was up to me.

¹³ Truman, pg. 421

¹⁴ Truman, pg. 415

Let there be no mistake about it”, but Truman also defends this in his letters.¹⁵ In one particular letter Truman responds to an article written by Karl T. Compton, a highly regarded physicist who had served on the Interim Committee to advise Truman on the atomic bomb. He wrote, “Your statement in *The Atlantic Monthly* is a fair analysis of the situation except that the final decision had to be made by the President, and was made after a complete survey of the whole situation had been made.”¹⁶ Even though Compton actually had more of a say in the final decision than Truman did, Truman’s tone in this letter is defensive, exposing a need to confirm that he was actually the one who made the final decision. In addition, after Truman sends the order to drop the bomb to General Carl Spaatz, he says, “With this order the wheels were set in motion for the first use of an atomic weapon against a military target. I had made the decision. I also instructed Stimson that the order would stand unless I notified him that the Japanese reply to our ultimatum was acceptable.”¹⁷ It is interesting that he has to repeat that he “had made the decision” emphasizing something that should be already obvious coming from a Presidential figure. However, this is inconsistent juxtaposed with the next line, which basically says that between the order on July 24th and the start date for the bombings on August 3rd, the only thing that could alter the order would be Japan accepting unconditional surrender. He does not express in any way that he will monitor current events or international affairs during that period to see if anything else comes up to alter his decision. This is peculiar and almost irresponsible for a man who in the sentence prior was just asserting his position as

¹⁵ Truman, pg. 419

¹⁶ Merrill, pg. 451

¹⁷ Truman, pg. 421

President by reaffirming that it was he who made the decision to put the atomic bombs to use.

There is much uncertainty surrounding why alternatives to dropping the atomic bomb were not seriously considered, and the fact that Truman was not a powerful force behind the decision to drop the bombs, and that he likely did not know of these possibilities, offers an explanation. It is no coincidence that the most widely known possible alternatives are the ones that Truman knew, because options known to Truman were more likely to reach public announcement, whereas ideas considered by the Interim Committee were kept more secretive. This is especially important because for an alternative course to have been taken, there would have had to be pressure from outside of the government to counteract the inside decisions of the Interim Committee. The option Truman seemed to have the greatest understanding of was the possibility of using the bomb as a demonstration to create a threat rather than to drop it on an actual military base or city full of people. On this topic Truman says, "I had realized, of course, that an atomic bomb explosion would inflict damage and casualties beyond imagination. On the other hand, the scientific advisors of the committee reported, "...we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use."...It had to be used against an enemy target."¹⁸ Truman was right that this was not a feasible possibility, but there are two other alternatives that were not taken under consideration by Truman himself or by the public.

One alternative to dropping the bombs on August 6th and 9th was simply to wait until a later date. As physicist and World War II military strategy advisor Blackett put it, "Since the next major United States move was not to be until November 1, clearly there was

¹⁸ Truman, pg. 419

nothing in the Allied plan of campaign to make urgent the dropping of the first bomb on August 6 rather than any time in the next two months.”¹⁹ Truman repeatedly says in his letters that, “My object is to save as many American lives as possible”, but it seems that if this were the case, then it would be in Truman’s best interest to wait until closer to November 1st, especially given the US’s knowledge of Russia’s planned invasion of Japan as well as tentative peace negotiations between Japan and Russia.²⁰ Stimson says that as of July 1945, “It was known to us that [Japan] had gone so far as to make tentative proposals to the Soviet Government, hoping to use the Russians as mediators in a negotiated peace.”²¹ This being said, if the US’s only goal was to save American lives, and there was not going to be another major loss of American lives until November 1st, wouldn’t the US be willing to wait to see if Russia’s invasion or Japan’s peace negotiations were successful before using an atomic weapon? The fact that neither Dr. Compton nor Mr. Stimson’s articles “makes any reference in detail to the other part of the Allied plan for defeating Japan; that is, the long-planned Russian campaign in Manchuria” underlines that Russia is at the heart of the reason why the US felt they could not wait to drop the atomic bomb.²² Although Russia was an ally, it was still necessary for the US to have control of the Far East after the war ended, and as top political advisors knew that Russia would be entering the war in mid-August, they felt the need to beat the Russians to control over Japan by dropping the atomic weapon. Even though “Japanese records suggest that it was the unexpected Russian invasion – more than the atomic bombings – which compelled the government’s surrender”, there is still evidence that the early dropping of the bomb was advantageous to

¹⁹ Blackett, pg. 130

²⁰ Merrill, pg. 210

²¹ Stimson, pg. 9

²² Blackett, pg. 131

the United States.²³ As Blackett put it, “The hurried dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a brilliant success, in that all the political objectives were fully achieved. American control of Japan is complete, and there is no struggle for authority there with Russia.”²⁴ The evidence still stands though that Truman did not understand Russia’s plans to enter the war against Japan in mid-August and that Japan had proposed peace negotiations with Russia, and this misunderstanding explains Truman’s insistence that the reason for the bombings was simply to save as many American lives as possible. Saving American lives was not the main reason the bombs were dropped; rather, having political control over post-war Japan was more significant factor.

One alternative to the use of the atomic bomb that is seldom discussed is the possibility of offering a conditional surrender to Japan instead of insisting on either an unconditional surrender or the use of atomic weapons. Historian John Chappell points out that, “Various studies have judged the United States’ rigid adherence to unconditional surrender a hindrance to concluding the war.”²⁵ Despite pressure to consider conditional surrender as an option to end the war, the US government did not budge. “Immediately after V-E Day, requests for clarification of surrender terms appeared in the print media”, and also, “In June 1945, the editors of *Christian Century* printed and circulated a petition which urged that Truman, in concert with the Allies, make a proclamation of terms by which peaceful relations with Japan could be restored...and predicted that it would contain more than twenty-five thousand signatures.”²⁶ These widely spread proposals for

²³ Herken, pg. 21

²⁴ Blackett, pg. 137

²⁵ Chappell, John D. *Before the Bomb: How America Approached the End of the Pacific War*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997. Pg. 116

²⁶ Chappell, pg. 117 and pg. 121

conditional surrender in the press contained specific suggestions for what conditional surrender could include that would still satisfy the American people. However, "Calls for modifying the policy of unconditional surrender caused concern within the U.S. government. In July 1945,...[Joseph Grew] warned that citizens must avoid the temptation to accept less than Japan's unconditional surrender."²⁷ The reason the United States did not want to settle for a conditional surrender is probably for the same reason they rushed the dropping of the atomic bomb – for assured control of the Far East after the war. An unconditional surrender as outlined at Potsdam certainly would guarantee the US's position abroad. However it seems that if there was a way to end the war under conditional terms that would have avoided the use of a weapon that would change the nature of war forever, this option should have been weighed with much more value than it was by the Truman administration.

By comparing the information we have today about what actually happened in 1945 versus the understanding that President Truman had of the situation at the time, it is clear that not only was Truman misinformed of the complexity of dropping the atomic bombs on Japanese cities, but that his lack of understanding affected other outcomes of the decision to use the bomb, such as the motivation for its use in the first place and alternative possibilities to end the war. Truman's simplistic understanding rooted from his minimal briefing by Stimson and Groves, his ignorance of the Allied agreement with Russia, his being away from the White House during the height of World War II events, and his over-emphasis on the fact that he actually did make the final decision to drop the bomb. Because the President, the head figure of the United States, was not completely knowledgeable

²⁷ Chappell, pg. 124

about the events relating to the atomic bomb, several misunderstandings arose among historians, scientists, and the public alike about why the bomb was used on a city instead of as a demonstration, why the US did not wait to use it, and why Truman's administration chose to use the atomic bomb instead of considering a conditional surrender for Japan. Whether the complications that arose during the Cold War were because of Truman's influence or if they were bound to happen anyway given the nature of the weapon, the bombs did help the US's position in the Far East post-war, so at least to that extent, the ever-ambiguous decisions made regarding the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had some positive effect.

Bibliography

Blackett, P.M.S. *Fear, War, and the Bomb*. New York, NY: Whittlesey House, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1949.

Chappell, John D. *Before the Bomb: How America Approached the End of the Pacific War*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997.

Herken, Gregg. *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War 1945-1950*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.

Merrill, Dennis, ed. *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb on Japan*. Vol. 1 of *Documentary History of the Truman Presidency*. University Publications of America, 1995.

Stimson, Henry Lewis. "The Decision to Use the Bomb." *Harper's Magazine*, February 1947.

Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs: 1945 Year of Decisions*. New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1986.