

## "Why We Did It!"

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"The blast at Hiroshima echoes 56 years later. But what did the decision look like at the time, to the men who chose to drop the bomb, that summer of 1945".

In August 1945, the GI's waiting to invade Japan had no doubt about the wisdom of obliterating Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear weapons. Upon hearing the news, "we whooped and yelled like mad, we downed all the beer we'd been stashing away," one dogface later recalled. "We shot bullets in the air and danced between the tent rows." Paul Fussel, a 21-year-old second lieutenant leading a rifle platoon, remembered that "for all the fake manliness of our facades, we cried with relief and joy. We were actually going to live. We were going to grow up to adulthood after all."

More than a half century later, relief has given way to uncertainty and regret. According to a recent Gallup poll, senior citizens and "baby-boomers" still approve of the bombing, but younger Americans, particularly those under the age of 30, believe that dropping the bomb on Japan was wrong. The Smithsonian Institution had to drastically scale down a 50th anniversary exhibit on the flight of the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the first atomic bomb, because angry veterans protested that the museum's politically correct curators made the Japanese look like innocent victims. Some modern historians (revisionists) argue that dropping the bomb was not only immoral but unnecessary. They contend that Japan was beaten by the summer of 1945 and would have collapsed without an invasion. Indeed, a few argue that the bomb actually prolonged the war. The real reason we dropped the bomb, they say, was not to finish off Japan but to intimidate our next enemy - the Soviet Union.

Such judgments have the quality of perfect hindsight, declaring not only what we should have done, but what we should have thought. The more revealing question may be, what were decision makers saying and thinking at the time? What pressures did they labor under? Through the diaries and contemporaneous accounts of President Truman and his top advisers, Newsweek has reconstructed a narrative of the decision to drop the bomb. What emerges most strikingly is the sense of urgency and anxiety - and the lack of a clear, cogent debate. The American public in the summer of 1945 was war-weary, far more disgruntled than we now remember. The scientists working on the bomb were not quite sure what they were making - or if it would even work. The top policymakers were worried about trying to end the war quickly, not abstract notions of morality. The decision they made was understandable, even inevitable, under the circumstances. In a real sense, there was no decision, no careful weighing of the pros and cons. Like most acts of embattled governments in times of war, this one was driven by the interplay of temperament and personality and the sheer momentum of events.

With each passing year, Harry Truman has become identified in the public mind with decisiveness and common sense. "the buck stops here" and "Give 'em hell Harry" have become comforting cliches. But when Truman succeeded Franklin Roosevelt on April 12, 1945, he was in a state of shock. "I'm not big enough. I'm not big enough for this job," he told a friend, Sen. George Aiken of Vermont. "Boys," he said tearfully to a group of reporters, "if you ever pray, pray for me now."

Truman wasn't fully briefed on the atom bomb for another two weeks. Then he was lectured, somewhat impatiently, by General Leslie R. Groves, the man in charge of the Manhattan Project, the all-out top-secret effort to build the atom bomb. In Groves' mind, Truman's only job was to acquiesce. The new president went along for the ride, Groves later boasted, "like a little boy on a toboggan." Such hubris was characteristic of Groves, a three-star general who earlier had made his reputation building the Pentagon.

Outwardly confident, somewhat overweight from compulsively munching chocolates, Groves would keep senior officials waiting outside his office for an hour. Then he would poke his head out and demand, "What are you doing here?" The so-called Atom General had almost 200,000 people working on the project at 37 secret plants and laboratories, and only a few knew what they were really working on. Groves prided himself on his ability to manipulate. Noticing that Truman had faithfully hung a portrait of FDR on his wall ("I'm trying to do what he would like," said Truman), Groves played on his insecurities. If the A-bomb project came to naught, Groves told Truman, it would "cast a lot of reflection on Mr. Roosevelt."

For all his cockiness, Groves was worried that his bomb would be a dud. Others in the military were skeptical about a mystery weapon purported to unlock the power of the universe. "The damn thing" will never work, said Adm. William Leahy, the chief of staff at the White House and an old "ordnance man" in the navy. Groves had spent \$2 billion (\$26 billion in today's dollars) on the project. Failure, he knew, would not only make FDR look bad. It would result in "the greatest congressional investigation of all times" - with General Groves in the dock.

The scientists working on the bomb at the Manhattan Project's top-secret laboratories in the New Mexico desert were confident that they could make a big bang - but they weren't sure how big. More cautious military planners argued that the bomb would have to be followed up by a raid of B-29's dropping incendiary bombs to guarantee a large conflagration. The

planners did not think the bomb would be big enough to end the war in one blow.

Groves was determined to demonstrate the power of what he called "the gadget." But by the late spring of 1945 he was running out of good targets. Gen. Curtis LeMay of the 20th Air Force was methodically destroying the cities of Japan with numerous firebombing raids. During 10 days in March, 11,600 B-29 sorties had wiped out 32 square miles of the four largest Japanese cities, killing more than 150,000 people. A raid on Tokyo on May 25 created a gigantic firestorm; bomber crews in the last waves could smell burning flesh thousands of feet below. Reading the bomb-damage assessments, Groves worried that he would not be able to find a city sufficiently unsullied to serve as a proper showcase for his new terror weapon.

Hiroshima, a city of 280,000 people at the southern end of Honshu, the largest of the Japanese islands, was a possibility. According to a report prepared by Groves' staff, the city was surrounded by hills that would "produce a focusing effect which would considerably increase the blast damage." But, crisscrossed by rivers, Hiroshima was not the best candidate for a firestorm. A better target, Groves believed, was Kyoto. The ancient capital with its Buddhist and Shinto shrines, had been spared so far. Groves liked the fact that the city was an "intellectual center." The victims would be "more apt to appreciate the significance" of the bomb.

Such thinking seems ghoulish now, but it was not out of the mainstream in the spring of 1945. Bombing civilian centers was anathema at the beginning of the war, but after the London blitz and the day-and-night raids against Germany in 1943-44, city-bashing had become routine, accepted by a war-weary public. In its March 19, 1945 issue, Newsweek celebrated the fact that "perhaps one million persons were made homeless" by LeMay's firebombing of Tokyo. It seemed clear, after the kamikaze attacks and fights to the death in Okinawa and Iwo Jima, that breaking Japan's will would take drastic measures.

Still, the Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, was disturbed by the firebombing of Japan. Stimson was an old-school gentleman, the unofficial chairman of the East Coast establishment. He was a warrior - at the age of 50, he had asked for a combat command in the first world war - but he believed in civilized war, with the rules of fair play. As secretary of state in the late 1920's, he had abolished America's code-breaking capability because "gentlemen do not open other gentlemen's mail." Now, as secretary of war, he thought that he had insisted on "precision" bombing, and he protested against the wholesale slaughter wreaked by General LeMay's bombing campaign.

Stimson was still stewing over the May 25th firebombing of Tokyo several days later when he called General Groves and demanded to know the target list for the A-bomb. Groves was balky about telling him. "On this matter, I am the kingpin," insisted Stimson. Groves grudgingly replied that the target was Kyoto. Stimson, who had visited the shrines decades before, said no. Smashing Japan's cultural center was wrong. It was akin to the Japanese targeting the Lincoln Memorial.

Stimson was haunted by the bomb, which in his diary he also called "the thing", "the dire", "the dreadful", "the terrible", and "the diabolical". The night after he ordered Groves not to bomb Kyoto, he was unable to sleep. In his diary, he wrote that the bomb "may destroy or perfect International Civilization." The weapon could be "a means for World Peace." Or, he wrote, it may be "Frankenstein". Stimson's ambivalence was the product of his background. As a Wall Street lawyer, he had tried to be ethical, refusing to represent seedy clients. But his real-world experience had also taught him that expediency was sometimes necessary. This mix of principle and calculation was blended into his strongly held view that the United States must be the single greatest power after the war, and that it was his job - his personal responsibility as an arbiter of the WASP upper class - to lay the groundwork. However frightening, the bomb could be a "mastercard" in the great game of diplomacy. "I called it a royal straight flush, and we mustn't be a fool about the way we play it," he wrote in his diary.

Stimson's sense of duty weighed on him; at 77, he was physically spent. He still rode and played paddle tennis at his estate on Long Island. On one evening in June of 1945, he told his assistant, John McCloy, that he would probably have to skip an important meeting, scheduled at the White House the following day, to discuss plans for the invasion of Japan. The landings on Kyushu island, on beaches named after cars (Beach Buick, Beach Cadillac, etc.), were scheduled to begin November 1. Stimson was all done in, he told McCloy, he had to rest. That evening, at his mansion off Rock Creek Park, Stimson did sit and listen as McCloy, a fellow Wall Street lawyer, worried aloud about the cost of invading Japan. From Europe and all over the Pacific, 1 million men were being assembled for the final assault on the homeland. Pentagon planners were predicting that 20,000 American soldiers would die in the first month. In fact, the death toll might well have gone higher. Japanese draftees were being trained to strap on explosives and hurl themselves at tanks, while high-school girls were equipped with carpenter's awls to guard their honor.

"We should have our heads examined if we don't consider a political solution," McCloy said. He had a carrot-and-stick proposal for coaxing the Japanese to lay down arms. Let them keep their emperor, he said; it will allow them to save face. And warn that if they don't surrender, the United States will use a terrible new weapon able to destroy cities in a single blow. Stimson seemed interested, but he was weary; he could feel a migraine coming on.

The next afternoon, the aging statesman did drag himself to the White House, but he said little while the different service chiefs voiced their parochial concerns. The navy wanted to blockade Japan into submission, the air force to bomb, the

army to invade. The Joint Chiefs were just getting up to leave when President Truman turned to McCloy and asked if he had something to say. McCloy looked at Stimson, who said, "Say what you feel about it."

McCloy made his case for letting the emperor keep his throne, coupled with the threat of dropping the bomb. At the mention of it, McCloy felt a chill in the room. The bomb was too secret to be discussed, even at the highest levels. In any case, no one supported McCloy's idea. A warning was too risky. Why alert the Japanese Air Force that a surprise attack was on the way. And suppose the bomb fizzled? As for the terms of surrender, the Allies had long agreed that there would be none; nothing less than unconditional surrender would do.

The meeting broke up without much discussion. There was no real debate. Yet McCloy's proposal was as close as the principal policymakers would ever come to formally considering an alternative to dropping the bomb.

In the days that followed, Stimson did take up McCloy's idea and try to privately lobby Truman. On July 2 he wrote the president, urging "a carefully timed warning" to the Japanese before using the bomb. "I believe Japan is susceptible to reason," he wrote. "Japan is not a nation composed wholly of mad fanatics."

But Truman wasn't listening. He respected Stimson, but he found him formidable, remote - not someone he could easily converse with, much less share any fears or doubts. Never one for idle theorizing, the president had no time for philosophical speculations about the true nature of the Japanese people. In the first week of July, he was preoccupied with the upcoming summit meeting, code named Terminal, in the Berlin suburb of Potsdam to settle postwar claims between the Allies. The United States was by far the strongest of the Big Three Allies, but Truman felt anxious about the reputations and experience of the war leaders with whom he was about to parley. On July 6, 1945 the president set sail aboard the battleship Augusta for Europe and his first meeting with Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill.

Truman's close companion on the voyage was his just-appointed secretary of state, Jimmy Byrnes. A South Carolina pol who practiced patronage the way Henry Stimson practiced his backhand. Byrnes had been a mentor to Truman in the U. S. Senate. He was cagey and tough-minded, a self-made man who trusted no one. A little sheepish that he, not his mentor, was in the White House, Truman deferred to Byrnes's political judgment.

The new secretary of state was dead set against making any kind of deal with Japan. The public mood, as the former senator knew, was not merciful. The Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and the Bataan Death March were still fresh memories. A recent newspaper photo had shown a Japanese soldier raising his sword to behead an American POW, who was bent over, on his knees. A poll showed that a third of Americans wanted to execute the Japanese emperor. Only 7 percent thought Hirohito should keep his throne. Byrnes did not have to belabor the polling numbers as the two politicians played long hands of poker in their stateroom on the Augusta. During his first speech in Congress, Truman had received his most ardent ovation when he demanded unconditional surrender. The novice president did not want to look as though he were going soft now.

Byrnes had another angle he wanted to pursue with Truman. The new secretary of state, who had little other foreign-policy experience, had been at the Big Three conference at Yalta the previous winter. He had watched as Stalin began to signal his postwar ambitions in Eastern Europe. He could see that the Soviet Union would pass quickly from ally to rival. If the Russians knew that the United States had an atom bomb - and the willingness to use it - they would be "more manageable," as Byrnes put it.

Truman was equally determined to show that he could stand up to the Kremlin. Mocked as a "sissy" for his thick glasses and clumsiness as a little boy, Truman was never one to back off. In April, after his first meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov, a contentious affair, Truman had crowed, "I gave him the one-two, right to the jaw." Now, as Truman arrived in Potsdam, he was well aware that the atomic bomb was a diplomatic tool as well as a weapon of war. Stalin, Truman quickly determined, was "an S.O.B." who thought of himself as "The Big I Am." The Kremlin leader had some demands that were "dynamite," Truman wrote in his diary. "But I have some dynamite too which I am not exploding now."

While the Allied chieftains were testing each other at Potsdam, the empire of Japan was collapsing. Through the code-breaking operation known as "Magic", U. S. intelligence learned in mid-July that the Japanese had begun to send peace feelers through Tokyo's ambassador to Moscow. Hirohito, it seemed, was not the butcher of the newsreels but rather shy and dutiful. "It is His Majesty's heart's desire to see the swift termination of the war," read one cable intercepted by Magic. Hirohito did have one unalterable condition: he wanted to keep his throne to avoid social chaos and military rule after the surrender. As McCloy had predicted to Stimson back in June, he wanted a way to save face.

Revisionist historians have suggested that the Japanese peace feelers might have been an opening, an opportunity to end the war without using the bomb. From a military perspective, there was no particular urgency to end the war right away. The bloody campaign of "island hopping" was essentially over, and the invasion of Japan was not scheduled to begin for another three months. A strategic-bombing survey conducted by the War Department after the war concluded that Japan would have surrendered before Nov. 1 - even if the atom bomb had never been used. Why, the "revisionists" ask, were American policymakers in such a rush to drop the bomb? Why didn't they just wait for Japan to fall like a piece of rotten fruit?

That is a much simpler question to ask in retrospect than it was for policymakers to focus on at the time. From Europe, military commanders were warning about the low morale of troops who had already fought their war against Germany and had no stomach to fight another one against Japan. They wanted to go home - right away; not next week or next month. Labor leaders at home were reporting restiveness against wartime wage controls, and American families everywhere were tired of sacrifice. They wanted the war over with as quickly as possible. After Pearl Harbor, few Americans were willing to trust the Japanese. They would have been very wary of negotiating with the enemy. And, in fact, diehards in the Japanese military did not want to deal. They wanted to commit national suicide. "Would not it be wondrous for this whole nation to be destroyed like a beautiful flower?" implored General Anami, the war minister. There were other complications as well: Japan had made its diplomatic overtures to Moscow, but Stalin had no interest in making peace. In late July the Kremlin dictator was pushing up Soviet plans to invade Manchuria, occupied by the Japanese army. To set up a back channel between Tokyo and Washington would have been difficult. If Truman had tried to make a separate peace with the Japanese - and the story leaked - he would have been pilloried from Moscow to Los Angeles.

Indeed, under the circumstances, making peace with the Japanese was such a remote possibility that it does not appear to have been seriously discussed at Potsdam. The only voice agitating for a political solution belonged to Henry Stimson, and even his was edged with doubt. He was the one man who might have made a difference - who had both the standing and the breadth of vision to raise moral issues - and he was feeling cut out. Truman had not even invited him to come on the Augusta; the secretary of war had made his own way by army transport. Jimmy Byrnes, Stimson griped in his diary, was "hugging matters in this conference pretty close to his bosom." Stimson did, on several occasions, press Truman and Winston Churchill to back off from the demand for unconditional surrender and offer to allow the Japanese to keep their emperor. Still, he remained ambivalent about the bomb. It was a terrible and inhuman weapon. But he wanted the war over. If the United States did not use the bomb, he knew, it would continue to rain firebombs down on Japanese cities until Tokyo surrendered. If the bomb could end the war quickly, it might actually save lives.

In the New Mexico desert, the scientists waiting anxiously for the first test of the atom bomb were laying bets. Enrico Fermi jokingly offered to wager anyone that the bomb would ignite the atmosphere or simply just incinerate New Mexico. Other scientists tried to guess at the bomb's "yield", with most betting on the low side, as low as 200 tons of TNT.

In the cold predawn hours of July 16, the scientists put suntan lotion on their hands and faces and wore dark glasses. General Groves' only thoughts, he later recorded, were "what I would do if the countdown got to zero and nothing happened."

At zero hour, a brilliant flash filled the sky. A column of fire, eerily colored green, red and blue scaled 10,000 feet straight up and billowed out, like a grotesque flower. Instrument needles jumped: the yield was between 15,000 and 20,000 tons of TNT.

"The Little Boy", Groves cabled Stimson at Potsdam, is "husky." The news, Stimson wrote in his diary, produced a change "in my own psychology." The septuagenarian secretary of war "cut a gay caper", noted an aide. He was all relieved that he had something to show for the \$2 billion the War Department had spent on the atomic project. "Well," he remarked, "I shall not be sent to prison in Fort Leavenworth." In his scratchy old-man's voice, buoyed for the first time in days, Stimson read Groves' account of the bomb to Truman and Byrnes. The test had been "successful beyond the most optimistic expectations of anyone," Groves wrote. The blinding light looked like "several suns at midday." The shock waves broke windows 125 miles away. The reports from Alamogordo described the bomb as "magnificent", "beautiful", "stupendous".

Truman and Byrnes listened, transfixed. The president was "tremendously pepped up." Stimson noted in his diary. The other two leaders in the Big Three immediately noticed the American president's new confidence. Truman thereafter "bossed" the conference, observed Winston Churchill. Stalin greeted the news of the bomb coolly - while secretly ordering his minions to press harder on the Soviets' own atom-bomb project.

On July 31, Truman gave the order to bomb Hiroshima as soon as weather permitted after August 2nd. "We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world," he wrote in his diary. "It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Area, after Noah and his famous Ark." Having indulged in Biblical melodrama, he then engaged in some comforting psychological denial. He recorded that he had instructed Stimson to use the bomb "so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children... He and I are in accord. The target is a purely military one."

In the moments after the bomb detonated over the target at 8:15 in the morning of August 6th, women ran shrieking into the rivers, with their skin hanging off them like shreds of their kimonos. Birds were ignited in midair. Perhaps 70,000 men, women and children, most of them nonmilitary, died instantly. An additional 50,000 died within months from radiation poisoning and burns. Looking down from the Enola Gay a few seconds after the blast, a crewman thought the city looked like "a pot of boiling black oil".

Told of the successful attack as he sailed home from Europe aboard the Augusta, Truman announced to a group of

sailors, "This is the greatest thing in history." He went off to see a comedy revue and laughed heartily at the entertainment. He was not being callous. The relief that the war might end made him giddy. Back in Washington, however, Stimson had a heart attack at 5 o'clock on the morning of August 8th. He wrote in his diary: "Tell H. T. I must resign."

If there was little debate over the moral rights and wrongs of atomizing Hiroshima, there was even less over Nagasaki; indeed, no debate at all. The operation was left to Groves, who was eager to show that an "implosion" bomb, which had cost \$400 million to develop, could work as well as the "gun-type" bomb that had destroyed Hiroshima. Exploding over the largest Roman Catholic cathedral in the Far East, the Nagasaki bomb killed an additional 70,000 people. The victims included as many Allied prisoners of war as Japanese soldiers - about 250. Emperor Hirohito had already decided to surrender before Nagasaki. After the second bomb (and the invasion of Japanese-occupied Manchuria the same day by Soviet troops), the diehard militarists accepted the emperor's wishes, even though they had been unwilling to use the words like surrender or defeat. After some semantic dithering over the meaning of unconditional surrender, the Allies agreed to allow Hirohito to keep his throne after all, in order to get the war over with.

"Thank God for the Atomic Bomb," read the headline on an article in *The New Republic*. The American public strongly supported the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as they celebrated the end of the war. Truman's euphoria, however, quickly wore off. After Nagasaki he complained to a colleague of terrible headaches. Figurative or physical? he was asked. "Both", he replied.

General Groves tried to put a benign face on the bomb. He told a congressional committee that he had been told by doctors that radiation poisoning did not cause undue suffering. In fact, he ventured, it was "a very pleasant way to die." Gradually, however, as the gruesome details emerged, the American public began to feel queasy. An article on Hiroshima by John Hersey, detailing the ordeal of six survivors, published in the *New Yorker* in August, 1946, had an enormous impact. A scientist who had worked on the Manhattan Project wrote the magazine that he was "filled with shame to recall the whoopee spirit" with which he and colleagues had first greeted the news of the bombing.

Disturbed by the reaction, Stimson answered with a long, sober - and somewhat misleading - account in *Harper's*. (It made no mention of the Japanese peace feelers or the debate over whether the emperor could keep his throne.) Stimson had been asked to write the piece by James B. Conant, the president of Harvard, and one of the organizers of the Manhattan Project. Stimson was privately troubled by the task. "I have rarely been connected with a paper about which I have so much doubt at the last moment," he told a friend. He feared that the article would "excite horror among friends who heretofore thought me a kindly-minded Christian gentleman."

Harry Truman, on the other hand, buried any qualms he might have had. At a press conference in 1947 he told reporters, "I didn't have any doubts at the time." He said the decision had saved 250,000 American lives. In later years Truman would raise the number of lives saved to half a million or a million. "I'd do it again," Truman said in 1956. In 1965, seven years before he died, he repeated that he "would not hesitate" to drop the A-bomb. Perhaps he should have hesitated. But his decision, however unconsidered and event-driven, did end the war quickly. For all its terrible cost, it probably saved lives. It also allowed the world to see how truly awful the bomb was - one reason, perhaps, that it has not been used since.