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A-BOMB DECISION

"Step Was America's Least Abhorrent Choice. . .
It Also Made It Wholly Clear We Must Never
Have Another War"

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In his own words, former Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson tells the inside firsthand story of how the United States reached its momentous decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan. Mr. Stimson, who was more closely associated with the development and final decision to use the Atomic weapon than any other member of the Roosevelt and Truman cabinets, discloses that the bombs dropped on Japan were the only two then completed by the United States. This article is condensed by special permission from the original which was published in the February issue of Harper's Magazine.

It was the Fall of 1941 that the question of atomic energy was first brought directly to my attention. At that time President Roosevelt appointed a committee consisting of Vice President Wallace, General Marshall, Dr. Vannevar Bush, Dr. James B. Conant, and myself to advise the President on questions of policy relating to the study of nuclear fission.

For nearly four years thereafter I was directly connected with all major decisions of policy on the development and use of atomic energy, and from May 1, 1943, until my resignation as Secretary of War on September 21, 1945, I was directly responsible to the President for the administration of the entire undertaking . .

At the same time I was the President's senior adviser on the military employment of atomic energy.

The policy adopted and steadily pursued by President Roosevelt and his advisers was a simple one. It was to spare no effort in securing the earliest possible successful development of an atomic weapon. The reason for this policy was equally simple. The original experimental achievement of atomic fission had occurred in Germany in 1938, and it was known that the Germans had continued their experiments.

To Shorten Warfare

In 1941 and 1942 they were believed to be ahead of us, and it was vital that they should not be the first to bring atomic weapons into the field of battle. Furthermore, if we should be the first to develop the weapon, we should have the great new instrument for shortening the war and minimizing destruction.

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.

All of us of course understood the terrible responsibility involved in our attempt to unlock the doors to such a devastating weapon; President Roosevelt particularly spoke to me many times of his own awareness of the catastrophic potentialities of our work.

But we were at war, and the work must be done, I therefore emphasized that it was our common objective throughout the war, to be the first to produce an atomic weapon and use it . . .

On March 15, 1945, I had my last talk with President Roosevelt. My diary record of this conversation gives a fairly clear picture of the state of our thinking at that time . . .

"I went over with him the two schools of thought that exist in respect to the future control after the war of this project, in case it is successful, one of them being the secret close-in attempted control of the project by those who control it now, and the other being the international control based upon freedom both of science and of access. I told him that those things must be settled before the first projectile is used and that he must be ready with a statement to come out to the people on it just as soon as that is done. He agreed to that . . ."

I did not see Franklin Roosevelt again. (Roosevelt died April 12th).

Sees President Truman

The next time I went to the White House to discuss atomic energy was April 25, 1945, and 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.

Now he was President and Commander-in-Chief, and the final responsibility in this as in so many other matters must be his. President Truman accepted this responsibility with the same fine spirit that Senator Truman had shown before in accepting our refusal to inform him.

I discussed with him the whole history of the project. We had with us General Groves, who explained in detail the progress which had been made and the probable future course of the work. I also discussed with President Truman the broader aspects of the subject, and the memorandum which I used in this discussion is again a fair sample of the state of our thinking at the time.

Memorandum Discussed With President Truman

April 25, 1945

1. Within four months we shall in all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history, one bomb of which could destroy a whole city.
2. Although we have shared its development with the U. K. (Great Britain), physically the U. S. is at present in the position of controlling the resources with which to construct and use it and no other nation could reach this position for some years.
3. Nevertheless it is practically certain that we could not remain in this position indefinitely.
 - A. Various segments of its discovery and production are widely known among many scientists in many countries, although few scientists are now acquainted with the whole process which we have developed.
 - B. Although its construction under present methods requires great scientific and industrial effort and raw materials, which are temporarily mainly within the possession and knowledge of U.S. and U.K., it is extremely probable that much easier and cheaper methods of production will be discovered

by scientists in the future, together with the use of materials of much wider distribution. As a result, it is extremely probable that the future will make it possible for atomic bombs to be constructed by smaller nations or even groups, or at least by a larger nation in a much shorter time.

4. As a result, it is indicated that the future may see a time when such a weapon may be constructed in secret and used suddenly and effectively with devastating power by a wilful nation or group against an unsuspecting nation or group of much greater size and material power. With its aid even a very powerful unsuspecting nation might be conquered within a very few days by a very much smaller one . . .

5. The world in its present state of moral advancement compared with its technical development would be eventually at the mercy of such a weapon. In other words, modern civilization might be completely destroyed.

6. To approach any world peace organization of any pattern now likely to be considered, without an appreciation by the leaders of our country of the power of this new weapon, would seem to be unrealistic. No system of control heretofore considered would be adequate to control this menace. Both inside any particular country, and between the nations of the world, the control of this weapon will undoubtedly be a matter of the greatest difficulty and would involve such thorough-going rights of inspection and internal controls as we have never heretofore contemplated.

7. Furthermore, in the light of our present position with reference to this weapon, the question of sharing it with other nations and if so shared, upon what terms, becomes a primary question of our foreign relations. Also our leadership in the war and in the development of this weapon had placed a certain moral responsibility upon us which we cannot shirk without very serious responsibility for any disaster to civilization which it would further.

8. On the other hand, if the problem of the proper use of this weapon can be solved, we would have the opportunity to bring the world into a pattern in which the peace of the world and our civilization can be saved.

The next step in our preparations was the appointment . . . of the interim committee, charged with advising the President the various questions raised by our apparently imminent success in developing an atomic weapon. I was its chairman . . .

Use of Bomb Decided

On June 1, after its discussions with the scientific panel, the interim committee unanimously adopted the following recommendations:

(1) The bomb should be used against Japan as soon as possible.

(2) It should be used on a dual target -- that is, a military installation or war plant surrounded by or adjacent to houses and other buildings most susceptible to damage, and

(3) It should be used without prior warning of the nature of the weapon.

One member of the committee, Mr. (Ralph A.) Bard, Under-Secretary of the Navy, later changed his view and dissented from recommendation.

In reaching these conclusions the interim committee carefully considered such alternatives as a detailed advance warning or a demonstration in some inhabited area. Both of these suggestions were discarded as impractical.

They were not regarded as likely to be effective in compelling a surrender of Japan, and both of them involved serious risks. Even the New Mexico test would not give final proof that any given bomb was certain to explode when dropped from an airplane.

Quite apart from the generally unfamiliar nature of atomic explosives, there was the whole problem of exploding a bomb at a predetermined height in the air by a complicated mechanism which could not be tested in the static test of New Mexico.

Nothing would have been more damaging to our effort to obtain surrender than a warning or a demonstration followed by a dud -- and this was real possibility. Furthermore, we had no bombs to waste. It was vital that a sufficient effect be quickly obtained with the few we had . . .

The principal political, social and military objective of the United States in the summer of 1945 was the prompt and complete surrender of Japan. Only the complete destruction of her military power could open the way to lasting peace.

Japan, in July 1945, had been seriously weakened by our increasingly violent attacks. It was known to us that she had gone so far as to make tentative proposals to the Soviet government, hoping to use the Russians as mediators in a negotiated peace.

These vague proposals contemplated the retention by Japan of important conquered areas and were therefore not considered seriously. There was as yet no indication of any weakening in the Japanese determination to fight rather than accept unconditional surrender. If she should persist in her fight to the end, she had still a great military force.

Might Resist to End

As we understood it in July, there was a very strong possibility that the Japanese government might determine upon resistance to the end, in all the areas of the Far East under its control . . .

We were planning an intensified sea and air blockade, and greatly intensified strategic air bombing through the Summer and early Fall, to be followed on November 1 by an invasion of the Southern island of Kyushu.

This would be followed in turn by an invasion of the main island of Honshu in the Spring of 1946. The total U.S. military and naval force involved in this grand design was of the order of 5,000,000 men; if all those indirectly concerned are included, it was larger still.

We estimated that if we should be forced to carry this plan to its conclusion, the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1946, at the earliest.

I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties, to American forces alone. Additional large losses might be expected among our Allies, and, of

course if our campaign were successful and if we could judge by previous experience, enemy casualties would be much larger than our own.

With these considerations in mind, I wrote a memorandum for the President, on July 2, which I believe fairly represents the thinking of the American Government as if finally took shape in action.

This memorandum was prepared after discussion and general agreement with Joseph C. Grew, Acting Secretary of State, and Secretary of the Navy Forrestal, and when I discussed it with the President, he expressed his general approval . . .

The adoption of the policy outlined in the memorandum of July 2 was a decision of high politics; once it was accepted by the President the position of the atomic bomb in our plans became quite clear.

I find that I stated in my diary as early as July 19, that "the last chance warning . . . must be given before an actual landing of the ground forces in Japan, and fortunately the plans provide for enough time to bring in the sanctions to our warning in the shape of heavy ordinary bombing attack and an attack of S-1. S-1 was a code name for the atomic bomb.

Warning From Potsdam

There was much discussion in Washington about the timing of the warning to Japan. The controlling factor in the end was the date already set for the Potsdam meeting of the Big Three. It was President Truman's decision that such a warning should be solemnly issued by the U.S. and the U.K. (Great Britain) from this meeting. With the concurrence of the head of the Chinese Government, so that it would be plain that all of Japan's principal enemies were in entire unity.

This was done in the Potsdam ultimatum of July 26, which very closely followed the memorandum of July 2, with the exception that it made no mention of the Japanese Emperor.

On July 28, the Premier of Japan, SUZUKI, rejected the Potsdam ultimatum by announcing that it was "unworthy of public notice." In the face of this rejection we could only proceed to demonstrate that the ultimatum had meant exactly what it said . . .

Because of the importance of the atomic mission against Japan, the detailed plans were brought to me by the military staff for approval.

With President Truman's warm support I struck off the list of suggested targets the city of Kyoto. Although it was a target of considerable military importance, it had been the ancient capital of Japan and was a shrine of Japanese art and culture. We determined that it should be spared.

I approved four other targets including the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Hiroshima was bombed on August 6, and Nagasaki on August 9.

We waited for a result. We waited one day.

A-Bomb Is Effective

Many accounts have been written about the Japanese surrender. After a prolonged Japanese Cabinet session in which

the deadlock was broken by the Emperor himself, the offer to surrender was made on August 10 . . .

Our great objective was thus achieved, and all the evidence I have seen indicates that the controlling factor in the final Japanese decision to accept our terms of surrender was the atomic bomb.

The two atomic bombs which we had dropped were the only ones we had ready, and our rate of production at the time was very small.

Had the war continued until the projected invasion on November 1, additional fire raids of B-29's would have been more destructive of life and property than the very limited number of atomic raids which we could have executed in the same period.

But the atomic bomb was more than a weapon of terrible destruction; it was a psychological weapon.

So far as the Japanese could know, our ability to execute atomic attacks, if necessary by many planes at a time, was unlimited.

As Dr. Earl Compton has said: "It was not one atomic bomb, or two, which brought surrender, it was the experience of what an atomic bomb will actually do to a community, plus the dread of many more, that was effective . . ."

As I read over what I have written, I am aware that much of it, in this year of peace, may have a harsh and unfeeling sound. It would perhaps be possible to say the same things and say them more gently. But I do not think it would be wise.

As I look back over the five years of my service as Secretary of War, I see too many stern and heartrending decisions to be willing to pretend that war is anything else than what it is.

The face of war is the face of death; death is an inevitable part of every order that a wartime leader gives. The decision to use the atomic bomb was a decision that brought death to over a hundred thousand Japanese.

No explanation can change that fact and I do not wish to gloss it over. But this deliberate, premeditated destruction was our least abhorrent choice.

The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki put an end to the Japanese war.

It stopped the fire raids, and the strangling blockade, it ended the ghastly specter of a clash of great land armies.

In this last great action of the second world war we were given final proof that war is death.

War in the twentieth century has grown more barbarous, more destructive, more debased in all its aspects. Now, with the release of atomic energy, man's ability to destroy himself is very nearly complete.

The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended a war. They also made it wholly clear that we must never have another war.

This is the lesson men and leaders everywhere must learn, and I believe that when they learn it they will find a way to lasting peace.

There is no other choice.