

President Truman and the atomic bomb – setting the record straight by Rear Adm. Lloyd “Joe” Vasey USN (ret)

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The White House has reported that President Barack Obama will visit Hiroshima later this month, one of the two Japanese cities devastated in World War II by atomic bombs. The White House has definitively stated that no apology will be given during the visit and the Abe administration has stated that none is expected or desired. Nonetheless, the very fact of a visit to either city will be viewed by many in Japan and elsewhere as an “implicit apology” for the US nuclear attacks in 1945. Those who believe that some type of apology is in order need to put themselves in President Truman’s shoes and discuss the action in its historical context.

The president of the United States carries awesome responsibilities both in peace and war, and no world leader, before or since, has been confronted with such a momentous and fateful decision as that facing Harry Truman in early August 1945, when he ordered the atomic bomb be dropped on Hiroshima. Only recently succeeded to the presidency after the death of President Roosevelt in April 1945, and beset by a multitude of problems of enormous significance related not only to the war in progress but also for the postwar world, Truman leaned heavily on the counsel of his senior and most trusted advisors on the question of the using the “bomb.”

The development of the atomic weapon had been one of the best kept secrets of World War II and only a handful of the top civilian and military officials in Washington knew about it. After Roosevelt’s death, Secretary of War Henry Stimson briefed the new president on the status of the program and predicted that “within four months, we shall in all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history.” On Stimson’s recommendation, Truman appointed a special committee to advise him on the whole field of atomic energy in its political, military, and scientific aspects, and to assist him in deciding whether to use the bomb against Japan. The following distinguished Americans were committee members, and during their extensive deliberations they called for advice and information from several scientists who had helped developed the bomb:

Secretary of War Henry Stimson; George L. Harrison, president of the New York Life Insurance Company; James F. Byrnes, later the secretary of State; Undersecretary of the Navy Ralph A. Brad; Assistant Secretary of State William L. Clayton; Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall; and eminent scientists Vannevar Bush, Karl T. Compton, and James B. Conant.

On June 1, 1945, the committee submitted its report to the president, recommending unanimously that the bomb be used against Japan as soon as possible. The conclusions of the committee, wrote Secretary Stimson in 1947 “were similar to my own, although I reached mine independently. I felt that to extract a general surrender from the Emperor and his military advisers, they must be administered a tremendous shock which would carry convincing proof of our power to destroy the empire. Such an effective shock would save many times the number of lives, both American and Japanese.”

Some of the scientists working on the Manhattan Project to develop the bomb did not agree principally because the “wave of horror and revulsion, that might follow the sudden use of an atomic bomb would more than outweigh its military advantages.” They recommended instead a demonstration of the new weapon for “representatives of the United Nations on the desert of a barren island,” and then to issue a preliminary ultimatum to Japan. If this ultimatum was rejected and if sanction of the United Nations (and of public opinion at home) were obtained, “then and only then should the United States consider using the bomb.”

These views were included in a petition sent directly to the White House by a group of scientists from Chicago and were referred to a distinguished scientific panel consisting of Arthur Compton, Enrico Fermi, E.O. Lawrence, and Oppenheimer, all of whom were eminent nuclear physicists. In mid-June the panel reported that it had studied carefully the proposals made by the scientists but could see no practical way of ending the war by a technical demonstration and that there was “no acceptable alternative to direct military use.”

Nothing would have been more damaging to our effort, wrote the secretary of War, “than a warning or demonstration followed by a dud, and this was a real possibility.” James Byrnes expressed the fear that if the Japanese were warned in advance that an atomic bomb would be exploded, they would bring US prisoners of war into the most likely target areas. Further complicating President Truman’s dilemma was the skepticism of some advisors that the bomb may not work at all, on the ground or in the air. Adm. Leahy, the senior military advisor in Washington to the president, advised him, “the bomb will never go off and I speak as an expert in explosives.”

Nevertheless, in mid-1945, there was virtual unanimity among the president’s top echelon civilian advisors on the use of the bomb.

The general military situation in the Pacific was favorable to the allies. Manila, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa were in allied hands, although at a great human cost in casualties, and US submarine and air attacks had virtually isolated Japan from sources of supplies and resources. Japan’s Navy had been

decimated. In Europe, Germany had surrendered and US troops were available for redeployment to the Pacific

But although defeated in a military sense, Japan showed no disposition to surrender unconditionally. In the battle for Okinawa for example, the Japanese lost 100,000 of the 120,000 men in their garrison, and though they were defeated, thousands more Japanese soldiers fell on their own grenades rather than surrender.

In mid-June 1945, President Truman met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to review war strategy. Truman subsequently stated "We still hadn't decided whether or not to use the atomic bomb, and the Chiefs of Staff suggested that we plan an attack (invasion) on Kyushu, the Japanese island on their extreme west, around the beginning of November, and follow up with an attack on the more important island of Honshu. But the statistics that the generals gave me were as frightening as the news of the big bombs.... Gen. Marshall then estimated that, since the Japanese would unquestionably fight more fiercely than ever on their own homeland, we would probably lose a quarter of a million men on their own homeland and possibly as many as a half million in taking the two islands. I could not bear this thought, and it led to the decision to use the atomic bomb." Other options had also been discussed such as the blockading of Japan, "blasting them into surrender" with conventional weaponry, and dropping an atomic bomb in a low population, isolated area where the Japanese could see the power of the new weapons. But it was reluctantly concluded that such measure would not be enough "to convince the fanatic Japanese." President Truman also consulted at length with his top diplomatic advisors on various options for ending the war by political means. All were rejected.

Although the Joint Chiefs, according to army historians of this period, accepted the invasion concept as the basis for their war plans, reservations were expressed by some US military leaders, particularly Admirals Leahy and King (Chief of Naval Operations) who later declared they did not favor the invasion plans believing "that the defeat of Japan could be accomplished by conventional air and sea power alone." But that would take time.

Truman stated in his memoir, "Then when we finally talked about the atomic bomb, on July 21, coming to the awful conclusion that it would probably be the only way the Japanese might be made to surrender quickly." One more plea for surrender was made by Truman to the Japanese on July 29 and was rejected immediately. "Then I gave the final order, saying I had no qualms if millions of lives could be saved ... I meant both American and Japanese lives."

The Soviet Union's role in the war against Japan was not a factor in the decision to use the atomic bomb as some critics later suggested. Soviet participation in the war against Japan was a goal long pursued by the Americans in the belief that it would shorten the war and lessen the cost. But by mid-1945, most responsible US leaders were convinced that policy agreements with Stalin had been a "one way street" and the war could be won without Russian help.

On July 24, at the Potsdam conference, Truman informed Stalin that the Americans had "a new weapon of unusual

destructive force." The respected US diplomat Chip Bohlen who was present at the time, later reported that the Russians had already been at work on their own nuclear bomb, and that Stalin sent back immediate orders to accelerate the program. Averell Harriman, who was also at Potsdam later wrote, "The idea of using the bomb as a form of pressure on Stalin never entered the discussions at Potsdam. That wasn't the president's mood at all. The mood was to treat Stalin as an ally, a difficult ally, admittedly in the hope he would behave like one." The Soviet Union declared war on Japan Aug. 9, three days after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

Since World War II there has been debate over President Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb, some informed, but most based on conjecture. Such views are hindsight. The case for the use of the weapon was compelling at the time, given the history of Japanese aggression, the kamikaze spirit of Japanese warriors, the likelihood that Japanese civilians would fight fiercely to repel invaders, and Truman's final warning to Japan at Potsdam and its flat rejection. Most importantly were the millions of lives at stake – Japanese as well as American. Had a poll been taken of US servicemen in the combat zone at the time, I am certain that results would have supported Truman's decision unanimously.

We of "The Greatest Generation" are proud of our heritage and achievements. Any presidential action or policy that even appears as an implicit apology for the use of the atomic bomb would be a gross insult to us and our valiant comrades who fought and sacrificed for three and a half years to win the war and bring us a peace that liberated Asia.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.