

## The Decision to Risk the Future: Harry Truman, the Atomic Bomb and the Apocalyptic Narrative

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I

In his personal narrative *Atomic Quest*, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Arthur Holly Compton, who directed atomic research at the University of Chicago's Metallurgical Laboratory during the Second World War, tells of receiving an urgent visit from J. Robert Oppenheimer while vacationing in Michigan during the summer of 1942. Oppenheimer and the brain trust he assembled had just calculated the possibility that an atomic explosion could ignite all the hydrogen in the oceans or the nitrogen in the atmosphere. If such a possibility existed, Compton concluded, "these bombs must never be made." As Compton said, "Better to accept the slavery of the Nazis than to run a chance of drawing the final curtain on mankind."<sup>[1]</sup> Certainly, any reasonable human being could be expected to respond similarly.

Three years later, with Hitler dead and the Nazis defeated, President Harry Truman faced a comparably weighty decision. He writes in his 1955 memoirs that, on the first full day of his presidency, James F. Byrnes told him the U.S. was building an explosive "great enough to destroy the whole world."<sup>[2]</sup> On April 25, 1945, Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Brigadier General Leslie Groves gave Truman a lengthy briefing in which Stimson reiterated the warning that "modern civilization might be completely destroyed" by atomic bombs and

stressed that the future of mankind would be shaped by how such bombs were used and subsequently controlled or shared.<sup>[3]</sup> Truman recalled Stimson "gravely" expressing his uncertainty about whether the U.S. should ever use the bomb, "because he was afraid it was so powerful that it could end up destroying the whole world." Truman admitted that, listening to Stimson and Groves and reading Groves's accompanying memo, he "felt the same fear."<sup>[4]</sup>



Truman and Byrnes en route to Potsdam, July 11, 1945

Others would also draw, for Truman, the grave implications of using such hellish weapons. Truman noted presciently in his diary on July 25, 1945, after being fully briefed on the results of the Trinity test, that the bomb "may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark."<sup>[5]</sup> Leading atomic scientists

cautioned that surprise use of the bomb against Japan could precipitate an uncontrollable arms race with the Soviet Union that boded future disaster for mankind. The warnings reached Truman's closest advisors if not the President himself. Truman nevertheless authorized use of atomic bombs against Japan, always insisting he felt no "remorse" and even bragging that he "never lost any sleep over that decision." [6] For over sixty years, historians and other analysts have struggled to make sense of Truman's and his advisors' actions and the relevance of his legacy for his successors in the Oval Office.

In an incisive and influential essay, historian John Dower divides American interpretations of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki into two basic narratives--the "heroic" or "triumphal" and the "tragic." [7] The "heroic" narrative, shaped by wartime science administrator James Conant and Stimson, and reaffirmed by all postwar American presidents up to and including Bill Clinton, with only Eisenhower demurring, justifies the bombing as an ultimately humane, even merciful, way of bringing the "good war" to a rapid conclusion and avoiding an American invasion against a barbaric and fanatically resistant foe. Although Truman initially emphasized revenge for Japan's treacherous attack on Pearl Harbor, subsequent justifications by Truman, Conant, Stimson, and others stressed instead the tremendous number of Americans who would have been killed and wounded in an invasion. [8] As time passed, defenders of the bombing increasingly added generous estimates of the number of Japanese who the atomic bombings saved. While highlighting the decisive role of atomic bombs in the final victory had the unfortunate consequence of downplaying the heroic efforts and enormous sacrifices of millions of American soldiers, it served American propaganda needs by diminishing the significance of Soviet entry into the Pacific War, discounting the Soviet contribution to defeating Japan, and showcasing the super weapon that the United

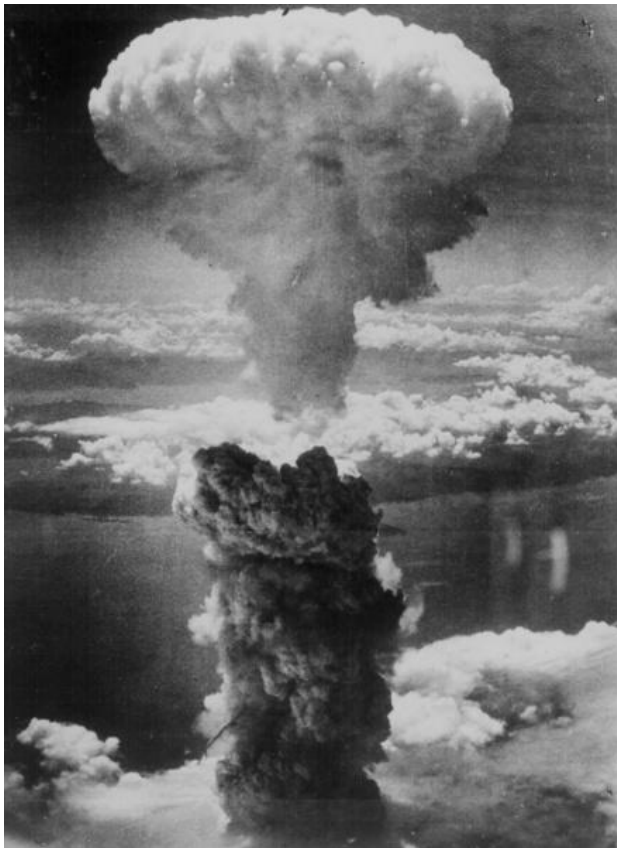
States alone possessed. [9]

This victor's narrative privileges possible American deaths over actual Japanese ones. [10] As critics of the bombing have become more vocal in recent years, projected American casualty estimates have grown apace--from the War Department's 1945 prediction of 46,000 dead to Truman's 1955 insistence that General George Marshall feared losing a half million American lives to Stimson's 1947 claim of over 1,000,000 casualties to George H.W. Bush's 1991 defense of Truman's "tough calculating decision, [which] spared millions of American lives," [11] to the 1995 estimate of a crew member on Bock's Car, the plane that bombed Nagasaki, who asserted that the bombing saved six million lives--one million Americans and five million Japanese. The recent inclusion of Japanese and other Asian casualties adds an intriguing dimension to the triumphal narrative, though one that played little, if any, role in the wartime calculations of Truman and his top advisors.

To this triumphal narrative, Dower counterposes a tragic one. Seen from the perspective of the bombs' victims, the tragic narrative condemns the wanton killing of hundreds of thousands of civilians and the inordinate suffering of the survivors. Although Hiroshima had some military significance as a naval base and home of the Second General Army Headquarters, as Truman insisted, American strategic planners targeted the civilian part of the city, maximizing the bomb's destructive power and civilian deaths. It produced limited military casualties. Admiral William Leahy angrily told an interviewer in 1949 that although Truman told him they would "only...hit military objectives....they went ahead and killed as many women and children as they could which was just what they wanted all the time." [12] The tragic narrative, in contrast to the heroic narrative, rests on the conviction that the war could have been ended without use of the bombs given U.S. awareness of

Japan's attempts to secure acceptable surrender terms and of the crushing impact that the imminent Soviet declaration of war against Japan would have.

Each of these narratives has its own images. The mushroom cloud, principal symbol for the triumphal narrative, has been almost ubiquitous in American culture from the moment that the bomb was dropped. Showing the impact of the bomb from a distance, it effectively masks the death and suffering below.[13]



The mushroom cloud above Nagasaki, the quintessential triumphal image

Survivors on the ground, however, unlike crew members flying above, vividly recall the flash from the bomb (pika), which signifies the beginning of the tragic narrative, and, when combined with the blast (don), left scores of thousands dead and dying and two cities in

ruins. No wonder many Japanese refer to the bomb as pikadon and the mushroom cloud that so pervades the American consciousness has been superseded in Japan by images of the destruction of the two cities and the dead and dying.



Hiroshima close up near the hypocenter three hours after the bomb

The Smithsonian's ill-fated 1995 Enola Gay exhibit was doomed when Air Force Association and American Legion critics demanded the elimination of photos of Japanese bombing victims, particularly women and children, and insisted on removal of the charred lunch box containing carbonized rice and peas that belonged to a seventh-grade schoolgirl who disappeared in the bombing. Resisting efforts to humanize or personalize the Japanese, they objected strenuously to inclusion of photos or artifacts that would place human faces on the bombs' victims and recall their individual suffering. For them, the viewpoint should have remained that of the bombers above the mushroom cloud, not the victims below it. It is worth noting that, prior to the change in military policy in September 1943, U.S. publications were filled with photos of Japanese

war dead, but no U.S. publication carried photos of dead American soldiers.[14]

For one who has confronted the still-smoldering hatred that some American veterans feel toward the Japanese six decades after the U.S. victory, it is stunning how little overt anti-Americanism one finds in Japanese discussions of the bombings. The Japanese, particularly the hibakusha (bomb-affected persons), have focused instead on their unique suffering. Drawing on the moral authority gained, they have translated this suffering into a positive message of world peace and nuclear disarmament. In fact, a vigorous debate about Japan's responsibility for its brutal treatment of other Asian peoples began in the early 1980s, picked up steam with the revelations by comfort women in the early 1990s, and has raged unabated, especially among Japanese intellectuals and politicians, since 1995, fueled, in part, by regular criticism from China and South Korea.[15]

In recent summers, I have been startled, during my annual study-abroad course in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by the frequency with which some Japanese, particularly college students, justify the atomic bombings in light of Japan's wartime butchery and the emperor's culpability for Japan's colonialism and militarism. Perhaps this should be expected given the multi-layered silence imposed on Japan in regard to atomic matters--first by Japan's own government, humiliated by its defeat and inability to protect its citizens, then by official U.S. censorship, which banned publication of bomb-related information, then by the political exigencies of Japanese dependence on the U.S. under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which blunted criticism of U.S. policy, and finally by the silence of many bomb victims, who faced discrimination in marriage and employment when they divulged their backgrounds.

Many hibakusha remain incensed over their treatment by the Atomic Bomb Casualty

Commission (ABCC), which the U.S. set up in Hiroshima in 1947 and Nagasaki in 1948 to examine but not treat the bomb victims.



Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission examination

Adding insult to injury, the ABCC sent physical specimens, including human remains, back to the U.S. and did not share its research results with Japanese scientists or physicians, results that could have been helpful in treating atomic bomb sufferers.[16] Anthropologist Hugh Gusterson, who spent three years studying weapons scientists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, explains the process of dehumanization whereby American scientists turned "the dead and injured bodies of the Japanese into bodies of data" and then sought additional American subjects for further experimentation. By turning human beings into dismembered body parts and fragments and calculating damage instead of wounds, coldly rational scientific discourse allowed Americans to study Japanese victims without ever reckoning with their pain and suffering. One scientist even got annoyed with Gusterson for saying the victims were "vaporized" when the correct term was "carbonized." [17]

Although Dower is undoubtedly correct that the heroic and tragic narratives, those of victors above and victims below the mushroom clouds, dominated the discussions surrounding the

50th anniversaries of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, these two narratives by no means exhaust the range of interpretive possibilities. Missing from much of the debate has been consideration of what I call the apocalyptic narrative, a framework for understanding U.S. actions that has even greater relevance to today's citizens who must continue to grapple with the long-term ramifications of nuclear war, particularly the threat of extinction of human life. While this third narrative has important elements in common with the tragic narrative, maintaining, as did much of America's top military command, that surrender could have been induced without the use of atomic bombs, it does not see the Japanese as the only victims and holds Truman, Byrnes, and Groves, among others, to a much higher level of accountability for knowingly putting at risk all human and animal existence.

Nor does the apocalyptic narrative have the kind of easily identifiable images associated with the other two narratives. Unlike the religious association with Armageddon or the images of alchemical transmutation in which destruction leads to rebirth and regeneration, nuclear annihilation is random, senseless, final, and universal. As with the end-of-the-world images associated with the existential crisis of 1929-1930, the post-apocalyptic nothingness resulting from nuclear annihilation is devoid of redemptive possibilities. The late 1920s and early 1930s cosmological theories coupling the concept of heat death with that of the expanding universe anticipated, in the distant future, a barren, lifeless planet drifting aimlessly through time and space in a universe indifferent to human existence. Such a vision, popularized by British astronomers James Jeans and Arthur Eddington, was reflected in the work of influential American thinkers like Joseph Wood Krutch and Walter Lippmann. Although the proximate causes differ, with nuclear annihilation resulting from human technological rather than natural destruction, the symbolism, once human life and

consciousness have been expunged in Truman's "fire destruction," is in other respects similar.[18]

By unleashing nuclear weapons on the world as the U.S. did in 1945, in a manner that Soviet leaders, as expected, immediately recognized as ominous and threatening, Truman and his collaborators were gambling with the future of life on the planet. Scientists at Chicago's Met Lab had issued reports and circulated petitions emphasizing just this point before the bombs were tested and used, warning against instigating a "race for nuclear armaments" that could lead to "total mutual destruction." [19]

In order to force immediate surrender and save American lives by delivering a knockout blow to an already staggering Japan, or, as Gar Alperovitz alternatively argues, to brandish U.S. might against and constrain the Soviet Union in Europe and Asia, or, as Tsuyoshi Hasegawa contends, to exact revenge against Japan while limiting Soviet gains in Asia, Truman willingly risked the unthinkable. He did so without even attempting other means to procure Japanese surrender, such as clarifying the surrender terms to insure the safety and continued "rule" of Emperor Hirohito as Stimson and almost all of Truman's other close advisors urged him to do, but which he and Byrnes resisted until after the two atomic bombs had been dropped; allowing Stalin to sign the Potsdam Proclamation, which would have signaled imminent Soviet entry into the war; or announcing and, if necessary, demonstrating the existence of the bomb. What terrified many scientists from an early stage in the process was the realization that the bombs that were used to wipe out Hiroshima and Nagasaki were but the most rudimentary and primitive prototypes of the incalculably more powerful weapons on the horizon--mere first steps in a process of maximizing destructive potential.



Oppenheimer and Leslie Groves at Trinity test site

Physicist Edward Teller impressed this fact on the group of “luminaries” Oppenheimer assembled in the summer of 1942, looking past the atomic bomb, which he considered as good as done, toward development of a hydrogen bomb, thousands of times more powerful, which became the focus of most of their efforts that summer.[20] Not all scientists shared Teller’s enthusiasm over this prospect. As Rossi Lomanitz recalled: “Many of us thought, ‘My God, what kind of a situation it’s going to be to bring a weapon like that [into the world]; it might end up by blowing up the world.’ Some of us brought this up to Oppenheimer; and basically his answer was, ‘Look, what if the Nazis get it first?’”[21]

In July 1945, physicist Leo Szilard drafted a petition signed by 155 Manhattan Project scientists urging the President not to act precipitously in using atomic bombs against Japan, warning: “The atomic bombs at our disposal represent only the first step in this

direction, and there is almost no limit to the destructive power which will become available in the course of their future development. Thus a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for the purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.”[22] Arthur Compton observed, “It introduces the question of mass slaughter, really for the first time in history.”[23] Stimson, whose finest moment would come in his desperate postwar attempt to put the nuclear genie back in the bottle, told the top decision makers, including Groves and Byrnes, on May 31, 1945, that the members of the Interim Committee did not view the bomb “as a new weapon merely but as a revolutionary change in the relations of man to the universe...; that the project might even mean the doom of civilization or it might mean the perfection of civilization; that it might be a Frankenstein which would eat us up.”[24] Oppenheimer correctly pointed out to the participants in that same Interim Committee meeting that within 3 years it might be possible to produce bombs with an explosive force between 10 and 100 megatons of TNT -- thousands of times more powerful than the bomb that would destroy Hiroshima.[25]

Hence, the apocalyptic narrative, applying an ethical standard to which leaders of the time could realistically be held, and an understanding of short-term and long-term consequences that should be expected of policymakers, indicts Truman, Byrnes, and Groves not only for the wholesale slaughter of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki but for behaving recklessly and thoughtlessly in inflicting a reign of terror on the rest of humankind. In 1942, Compton assessed the odds of blowing up the world and decided it was not worth the risk. In 1945, Truman contemplated the prospect of future annihilation but apparently gave it little serious consideration. To make matters worse, he did next to nothing to make amends for his

wartime shortsightedness when the opportunity to control nuclear weapons presented itself again during the first year of the postwar era.

Throughout that first year, Henry Wallace, who Roosevelt had asked to stay on as Secretary of Commerce after Truman replaced him as Vice President, struggled valiantly to avert an arms race and ease the threat of nuclear war. When Wallace persisted in criticizing administration policy toward the Soviet Union and the bomb, Truman ousted him from the Cabinet. In his address to a national radio audience on the night he submitted his letter of resignation, Wallace again voiced the theme that provoked Truman's ire, charging that the U.S. government's present course may mean "the extinction of man and of the world."<sup>[26]</sup> That Truman bears so much responsibility for creating this perilous state of affairs, regardless of his conscious intentions, justifies the application of such a harsh standard of judgment and demands a closer look at the man and his early presidency. For if Harry Truman, a relatively decent man, could behave so irresponsibly, what assurance is there that future presidents, under comparable circumstances, might not do the same? In fact, several have already come frighteningly close.



Roosevelt, Truman and Wallace

II

Truman always accepted personal responsibility for the bomb decision. In his memoirs, however, he states that the Interim Committee chaired by Stimson recommended that "the bomb be used against the enemy as soon as it could be done....without specific warning and against a target that would clearly show its devastating strength." This decision was supported by the scientific advisors to the committee and, Truman insists, by not only British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, but also by Truman's own "top military advisors." But, Truman adds, "The final decision of where and when to use the atomic bomb was up to me. Let there be no mistake about it. I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used."<sup>[27]</sup> Truman made the same point in a 1948 letter to his sister Mary: "On that trip coming home [from Potsdam] I ordered the Atomic Bomb to be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was a terrible decision. But I made it."<sup>[28]</sup>

Although Truman left office with abysmally low approval ratings, he is now widely viewed as one of America's near great presidents and treated as a political and moral paragon by leaders of both major political parties, including George W. Bush. President Bush's national security advisor and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who Bush credits with telling "me everything I know about the Soviet Union," named Truman her man of the century to Time.<sup>[29]</sup> Some historians have been equally impressed with the man and his legacy, none more than David McCullough, whose lavishly praiseful and historiographically vapid biography won the Pulitzer Prize.<sup>[30]</sup>

Truman did not learn of the atomic bomb project until Stimson told him, following the April 12 emergency Cabinet meeting, that the U.S. was working on "a new explosive of almost unbelievable destructive power."<sup>[31]</sup> Over the next few hours, days, and weeks, Truman made a series of decisions that would set the course

for his presidency and for the future of much of the world. Whereas Roosevelt took counsel from people of diverse views and ultimately exercised independent judgment on foreign affairs, Truman, inexperienced in these areas, turned almost exclusively to more conservative thinkers who harbored animosity toward the Soviet Union. Never comfortable with visionaries, idealists, or intellectuals, he sought advice from people who confirmed his own parochial instincts. His dependence on segregationist Byrnes, a man with considerably less formal education than even Truman himself, is a case in point. With the exception of Wallace, whose popularity and independent political base made him temporarily untouchable, New Dealers and more progressive holdovers from the Roosevelt administration were quickly marginalized by the new president and, before long, either ousted or pressured to leave the administration.

The fact that the bomb project had generated so much momentum by the time Truman became president that it would have taken bold leadership on his part to avoid using these new weapons has led some observers to minimize his personal responsibility. On several occasions, Groves insisted that Truman was swept along by the tide of events. "As far as I was concerned," Groves wrote, "his decision was one of non-interference--basically, a decision not to upset the existing plans....As time went on, and as we poured more and more money and effort into the project, the government became increasingly committed to the ultimate use of the bomb..."[32] On another occasion, Groves commented, "Truman did not so much say 'yes' as not say 'no.' It would indeed have taken a lot of nerve to say 'no' at that time." [33] He saved his most demeaning assessment for a 1963 article in *Look Magazine*, in which he described Truman as "a little boy on a toboggan." [34]

Groves and Byrnes, both of whom were strongly committed to using the bombs and both of whom saw their use as a means of firing a warning shot across the Soviet bow. Byrnes made his anti-Soviet motives abundantly clear at his May 28, 1945 meeting with scientists Leo Szilard, Harold Urey, and Walter Bartky. Groves reiterated this sentiment when he acknowledged: "There was never from about two weeks from the time I took charge of this Project any illusion on my part but that Russia was our enemy, and the Project was conducted on that basis. I didn't go along with the attitude of the country as a whole that Russia was a gallant ally." [35]

Not only did Truman rely on fervent proponents of using the bomb, he ignored the entreaties of Stimson, State Department Japan expert and former Ambassador Joseph Grew, Admiral William Leahy, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy, and other knowledgeable insiders who urged him to change the surrender terms and inform the Japanese that they could keep the emperor. Indeed, this is precisely what the U.S. ultimately did—but only after dropping the two atomic bombs in the US arsenal. Several scholars have argued that such modifications of surrender terms could have significantly expedited Japanese surrender, saving numerous Japanese and American lives, and obviating use of the bombs, [36] especially if combined with announcement of the impending Soviet declaration of war, a development that Japanese leaders dreaded. General Douglas MacArthur told former President Herbert Hoover that, if Truman had acted upon Hoover's May 30, 1945 memo and changed the surrender terms, the war would have ended months earlier. "That the Japanese would have accepted it and gladly," he averred, "I have no doubt." [37] Hoover believed the Japanese would have negotiated as early as February. [38]

Truman relied heavily upon the advice of

Truman ordered the bombs dropped on



Hiroshima and Nagasaki despite the fact that he and his top advisors were aware that the Japanese had abandoned hope for military victory and were seeking an end to the war. Prince Konoe Fumimaro had affirmed the view held by many Japanese leaders when he informed Emperor Hirohito in February 1945 that “defeat is inevitable.”[39] Japan’s military desperation was apparent to Americans who analyzed the intercepted July exchanges between Foreign Minister Togo Shigenori in Tokyo and Ambassador Sato Naotake in Moscow. The Pacific Strategic Intelligence Summary for the week of Potsdam meeting reported: “it may be said that Japan now, officially if not publicly, recognizes her defeat. Abandoning as unobtainable the long-cherished goal of victory, she has turned to the twin aims of (a) reconciling national pride with defeat, and (b) finding the best means of salvaging the wreckage of her ambitions.”[40] As Colonel Charles “Tick” Bonesteel III, chief of the War Department Operations Division Policy Section, recalled: “the poor damn Japanese were putting feelers out by the ton so to speak, through Russia.”[41] OSS official Allen Dulles briefed Stimson on Japanese peace feelers at Potsdam. Dulles wrote in *The Secret Surrender*: “On July 20, 1945, under instructions from Washington, I went to the Potsdam Conference and reported there to Secretary Stimson on what I had learned from Tokyo--they desired to surrender if they could retain the Emperor and the constitution as a basis for maintaining discipline and order in Japan after the devastating news of surrender became known to the Japanese people.”[42] That such indications of Japanese intentions were not lost on Truman and Byrnes is apparent not only in Truman’s July 18 diary entry referring to “the telegram from the Jap Emperor asking for peace”[43] but in the August 3 diary entry by Byrnes’s assistant Walter Brown, who recorded, “Aboard Augusta/ President, Leahy, JFB agrred [sic] Japas [sic] looking for peace.”[44] Byrnes publicly admitted as much when he spoke to the press on August 29. The

New York Times reported, “...Byrnes challenged today Japan’s argument that the atomic bomb had knocked her out of the war. He cited what he called Russian proof that the Japanese knew that they were beaten before the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.”[45] Similar comments by Forrestal, McCloy, and Stimson show how widespread this realization was. But, at Potsdam, when Stimson tried to persuade Truman to alter his approach and provide assurances on the emperor in the Potsdam Proclamation, Truman told his elderly Secretary of War that, if he did not like the way things were going, he could pack his bags and return home.



Atlee, Truman and Stalin at Potsdam

Truman also decided to issue the Potsdam Proclamation without Stalin’s signature, despite Stalin’s eagerness to sign and Truman’s understanding that Soviet entry into the war would deeply demoralize Japan and end Japan’s misguided hopes of securing better surrender terms through Soviet intercession.[46] Soviet entry also destroyed the possibility that Japan’s Ketsu-go strategy would succeed in inflicting heavy casualties on the Allied invading force, ultimately leaving the Japanese with little choice but surrender. Truman insisted that firming up Soviet involvement was his principal reason for going to Potsdam. Upon receiving Stalin’s confirmation, he exulted, Stalin will “be in the Jap War on August 15th. Fini Japs when

that comes about.”[47] Several intelligence estimates drew the same conclusion, including a June 30 War Department report that stated, “The entry of the Soviet Union into the war would finally convince the Japanese of the inevitability of complete defeat.”[48]

In the end, the Soviet invasion proved a far more powerful inducement to surrender than did the atom bombs. Japanese leaders, many demonstrating little concern for the suffering of their own people, had already witnessed U.S. firebombing and often near-total destruction of 64 cities without ending the war.

The image shows the front page of The New York Times from August 9, 1945. The masthead at the top reads "The New York Times" with "LATE CITY EDITION" on the right. The main headline is "SOVIET DECLARES WAR ON JAPAN; ATTACKS MANCHURIA, TOKYO SAYS; ATOM BOMB LOOSED ON NAGASAKI". Below the headline are several columns of text and a central map of East Asia. The map is titled "CIRCLE OF SEABARRIERS AROUND JAPAN IS COMPLETED" and shows the Pacific Ocean with various islands and territories marked. Other headlines include "TRUMAN TO REPORT TO PEOPLE TONIGHT ON BIG 3 AND WAR", "BIG AIRSAL BLOWED ARMY STRIKES", "RUSSIA AIDS ALLIES", "TAMMANY GUESTS LAST OF REBELS", and "MIDNIGHT SPEECH BY TRUMAN TO CONGRESS".

New York Times headlines Nagasaki bombing and Soviet entry into Manchuria, August 9, 1945

The U.S. had shown it could level Japanese cities almost at will in the months preceding Hiroshima. Whether the U.S. did so with hundreds of bombers or with one plane and one bomb did not fundamentally alter the strategic situation in the eyes of Japanese leaders. Even Army Minister Korechika Anami’s startling announcement on August 9 that he had intelligence indicating that the U.S. might have more than 100 additional atomic bombs and that Tokyo would be the next target did not change the views of members of the War Cabinet who remained deadlocked 3-3 over whether to simply demand retention of the emperor system or to add three additional

conditions.[49] While contradictory postwar statements by Emperor Hirohito and other Japanese leaders about whether the atomic bombings or the Soviet invasion ultimately proved decisive have provided ammunition for both sides in this debate, it seems clear that the powerful and rapidly advancing Soviet invasion definitively undermined both the Japanese military and diplomatic strategies far more profoundly and fundamentally than did the evisceration, however total and horrific, of the 65th and 66th destroyed Japanese cities. As Prime Minister Suzuki explained on August 13, when asked why they couldn’t delay surrender for a few days, “If we miss today, the Soviet Union will take not only Manchuria, Korea, Karafuto, but also Hokkaido. This would destroy the foundation of Japan. We must end the war when we can deal with the United States.”[50]

Top U.S. military leaders recognized Japan’s growing desperation, prompting several to later insist that the use of atomic bombs was not needed to secure victory. Those who believed that dropping atomic bombs on Japan was morally repugnant and/or militarily unnecessary included Admiral William Leahy, General Dwight Eisenhower, General Douglas MacArthur, General Curtis LeMay, General Henry Arnold, Brigadier General Bonner Fellers, Admiral Ernest King, General Carl Spaatz, Admiral Chester Nimitz, and Admiral William “Bull” Halsey. Groves admitted that he circumvented the Joint Chiefs of Staff to avoid, in part, “Admiral Leahy’s disbelief in the weapon and its hoped-for effectiveness; this would have made action by the Joint Chiefs quite difficult.”[51] In reflecting on his opposition, Leahy, who chaired the meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and served as Truman’s personal chief of staff, emphasized the barbaric nature of the atomic bombs, not doubts about their effectiveness, chillingly proclaiming, “It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan.

The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender....My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages.”[52]

Eisenhower was equally appalled, writing in his 1963 *Mandate for Change* that when he learned from Stimson at Potsdam that use of the bomb was imminent, “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, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives. It was my belief that Japan was, at that very moment, seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of ‘face.’”[53] Eisenhower told biographer Stephen Ambrose that on July 20, three days after learning this shocking news from Stimson, he met with Truman and his advisors and directly recommended that they not use the bombs.[54] Other military leaders drew similar conclusions about the imminence of Japanese surrender without use of atomic bombs. Air Force Chief of Staff General Henry Arnold wrote, “it always appeared to us that, atomic bomb or no atomic bomb, the Japanese were already on the verge of collapse.”[55] General Curtis LeMay argued that his conventional bombing had already ended the war: “Even without the atomic bomb and the Russian entry into the war, Japan would have surrendered in two weeks.”[56] Brigadier General Bonner Fellers wrote shortly after VJ day: “Neither the atomic bombing nor the entry of the Soviet Union into the war forced Japan’s unconditional surrender. She was defeated before either of these events took place.”[57] Brigadier General Carter Clarke, who was in charge of preparing MAGIC summaries in 1945, later stated, “we brought them down to an abject surrender through accelerated sinking of their merchant marine

and hunger alone, and when we didn’t need to do it, and we knew we didn’t need to do it, and they knew we knew we didn’t need to do it, we used them as an experiment for two atomic bombs.”[58] Undersecretary of the Navy Ralph Bard, the Navy representative to the Interim Committee, recommended, before leaving the government on July 1, that the U.S. not use the bombs without warning given the clear evidence that Japan was already militarily defeated and trying to surrender and the devastating blow that would be struck by the Soviet declaration of war. Such considerations led Admiral Leahy to conclude that an invasion would not have been necessary. Leahy explained, “I was unable to see any justification, from a national-defense point of view, for an invasion of an already thoroughly defeated Japan.”[659]

Even more surprising than the dissenting views of so many respected military leaders is the intense criticism by influential postwar conservatives. While moral outrage over the atomic bombings is now widely considered to be a left or “revisionist” position, ethical conservatives used to be equally condemnatory. Herbert Hoover wrote to a friend on August 8, 1945, “The use of the atomic bomb, with its indiscriminate killing of women and children, revolts my soul.”[60] Such attacks mounted over the next decade and a half, leading Medford Evans to write in a 1959 article in William F. Buckley’s *National Review*, “The indefensibility of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima is becoming part of the national conservative creed...”[61] Even the notorious hawk Edward Teller would later insist, somewhat disingenuously, that he too had opposed use of the bomb, explaining, in 1970, to Harvard biologist and Nobel laureate George Wald, “My reason for opposing the dropping of the bomb on Japan was that this action seemed to be wrong and unjustified.”[62]

No one can say with absolute certainty that assuring the Japanese about the emperor,

notifying them about Soviet entry, and alerting them to or demonstrating the bomb would have brought about Japanese surrender. But the chances that this formula would have succeeded seem very good, despite the vacillation by the emperor and the obstinacy of some of Japan's military leaders.[63] There is even a chance that taking these steps might have sped up the end of the war and saved American lives. However, the relevant question is why the president of the United States, given his expressed understanding of the potentially cataclysmic nature of these weapons, would not seek to avoid unveiling weapons "great enough to destroy the whole world" in a way that would dramatically increase the chances for future disaster or, as he himself put it, for "the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era after Noah and his fabulous ark."

Paul Boyer has cogently demonstrated that the American public responded to news of Hiroshima with an eerie sense of foreboding and widespread perception that American cities could one day suffer the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and worse--much, much worse.[64] News commentators, editorial writers, and journalists, instead of celebrating the military use of the bombs against Japanese cities, foresaw the dire implications for the future of the American people and the world. On the evening of August 6, NBC radio news commentator H.V. Kaltenborn declared, "For all we know, we have created a Frankenstein! We must assume that with the passage of only a little time, an improved form of the new weapon we use today can be turned against us." [65]

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch went even further the next day, warning that science may have "signed the mammalian world's death warrant and deeded an earth in ruins to the ants." [66] On August 7, John Campbell, editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, told readers of PM that, having contemplated this development for 15 years, he was "scared" because this wasn't

just a new bomb. It was "the power to kill the human race." [67] CBS radio commentator Edward R. Murrow captured the national sense of fear and foreboding on August 12, reporting, "Seldom, if ever, has a war ended leaving the victors with such a sense of uncertainty and fear, with such a realization that the future is obscure and that survival is not assured." [68] Following the announcement that Hiroshima had been bombed, G. Bromley Oxnam and John Foster Dulles of the Federal Council of Churches issued a statement contending that "If we, a professedly Christian nation, feel morally free to use atomic energy in that way, men elsewhere will accept that verdict. Atomic weapons will be looked upon as a normal part of the arsenal of war and the stage will be set for the sudden and final destruction of mankind." [69] Much of the public concurred. Twenty-six percent of respondents to an August Gallup Poll thought it "likely" that "some day experiments in smashing atoms will cause an explosion which will destroy the entire world." [70] Reflecting on the "almost infinite destructive power" of this "demonic invention," which it placed at a "stage of development comparable to that of artillery at the Battle of Crecy," the *Washington Post* noted on August 26, the life expectancy of the human species had "dwindled immeasurably in the course of two brief weeks." [71]

But it was the scientists who best understood the nightmarish implications of the process that Truman had initiated. In September 1945, Arthur Compton alerted Henry Wallace, who the scientists considered their most trustworthy ally in the administration, of the impending doomsday scenario. Four scientists had separately and independently approached Compton with theoretical plans for building a super bomb. The cat was clearly out of the bag. An effort comparable to the Manhattan Project, he felt, would have a good chance of success. But he and the scientists believed "that this development should not be undertaken because we should prefer defeat in war to a victory

obtained at the expense of the enormous human disaster that would be caused..." He calculated the potential damage as follows: "area completely destroyed by 1 atomic bomb, 4 square miles. Area completely destroyable by 1000 atomic bombs, as in a future war, 4000 square miles. Area completely destroyable by 1000 super bombs, about 1,000,000 square miles. Area of continental United States, about 3,000,000 square miles." [72]

The fundamental transformation wrought by dropping atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945 was apparent at the time and has not been lost sight of by subsequent generations. The atomic evisceration of downtown Hiroshima with the uranium bomb "Little Boy" on August 6 and the even more gratuitous obliteration of the Urakami district of Nagasaki three days later by the plutonium bomb "Fat Man" have merged in memory as one of history's watershed events. Two separate polls conducted in 1999 confirm its enduring significance. The first, sponsored by the Freedom Forum's Newseum, asked 67 veteran journalists to rank the 100 most important news events of the past century. The judges chose the atomic bombings as the number one news story of the 20th century. In the second, New York University's Department of Journalism asked 36 experts to identify the best works by American journalists of the past 100 years. The 19 journalism faculty members and 17 other journalism professionals placed John Hersey's 1946 *New Yorker* essay and book *Hiroshima*, which humanized Japanese victims with literary images that would haunt Americans for decades, atop their list. [73]

On his way back from Potsdam aboard the USS *Augusta*, Truman received news that the city of Hiroshima had been virtually wiped off the map. He proclaimed that "This is the greatest thing in history!" [74] There is little evidence that, despite his statements indicating awareness of the forces he had unleashed, he ever gave the bomb decision the serious

thought it deserved. In 1946, when MGM sent him a copy of the script of its upcoming docudrama about the production and use of the bomb, *The Beginning or the End*, for his approval, Truman voiced no objection to the scene where he decides to drop the bomb. It was only the insistence of Walter Lippmann, who during a subsequent screening found the president's flip decision "shocking," that stirred the White House to request changes. [75] The original version appears to have been more authentic. When an interviewer asked Truman whether the decision was morally difficult to make, he responded, "Hell no, I made it like that," snapping his fingers. [76] In fact, Truman never publicly acknowledged doubts or misgivings. When Edward R. Murrow asked him in a 1958 interview if he had any regrets about using the bomb or about any of his other presidential decisions, Truman responded, "Not the slightest--not the slightest in the world." [77]

Nor did he welcome others expressing doubts. Upon meeting Oppenheimer for the first time on October 25, 1945, Truman, with his typical insecurity-masking bluster, asked Oppenheimer to guess when the Soviets would develop a bomb. When Oppenheimer admitted that he did not know, Truman declared that he did: "Never." Unnerved, Oppenheimer said at one point, "Mr. President, I feel I have blood on my hands." Truman responded angrily. "I told him the blood was on my hands—to let me worry about that," he recounted to David Lilienthal. Truman liked this story enough to repeat it on several occasions, his responses varying slightly, but his contempt for Oppenheimer always evident. He told Acheson, "I don't want to see that son-of-a-bitch in this office ever again," and another time called him a "cry-baby scientist." [78]

Stimson was much less sanguine about his role in enabling the bomb decision, a problem he wrestled with incessantly in the final months of the war. In his wartime diary, he referred to

the bomb as “the dreadful,” “the terrible,” “the dire,” “the awful,” and “the diabolical” and spoke of it constantly with other top policymakers.[79] He wrote in his diary on May 28, 1945, “I have made up my mind to make that subject my primary occupation for these next few months, relieving myself so far as possible from all routine matters in the Department.”[80] He brought Arthur Page to the Pentagon and gave him little to do, wanting him, Page realized, always on hand “to talk about the atom.”[81] He later regretted that he was “the victim” Conant had chosen to defend the bomb decision in his 1947 Harper’s article.

“Conant,” Stimson explained to Felix Frankfurter, “felt very much worried over the spreading accusation that it was entirely unnecessary to use the atomic bomb.” Stimson admitted, “I have rarely been connected with a paper about which I have so much doubt at the last moment.”[82] He, more than most, understood the possibility that changing surrender terms might end the war without using atomic bombs or invading and struggled unsuccessfully to convince Truman to do so. In his memoir, he and Bundy admitted, “history might find that the United States, by its delay in stating its position, had prolonged the war.”[83] During the final months of the Pacific War, he was wracked with doubts about the wisdom and propriety of using the bomb and seemed to grasp the terrible significance of the new world he had helped to usher in. He drove the point home forcefully in the final paragraph of his “official” defense, writing: “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 steadily 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.”[84] Yet, much as with his de facto acquiescence in a strategic bombing policy he abhorred, he failed to impede Truman, Byrnes, and Groves from their desired use of atomic bombs against Japan.

Even British Prime Minister Winston Churchill recognized the problem of defending use of the bombs. Churchill visited Truman as the end of his presidency neared. Truman threw a small dinner to which he invited Robert Lovett, Averell Harriman, Omar Bradley, and Dean Acheson. Margaret, the President’s daughter, describes the scene:

Everyone was in an ebullient mood, especially Dad. Without warning, Mr. Churchill turned to him and said, “Mr. President, I hope you have your answer ready for that hour when you and I stand before Saint Peter” and he says, “I understand you two are responsible for putting off those atomic bombs. What have you got to say for yourselves?”[85]

Lovett intervened to save Truman from embarrassment. The judgment of history will not be that easy to evade.

### III

Hiroshima counted 140,000 dead by the end of 1945 and perhaps as many as 200,000 by 1950. Nagasaki lost over 70,000. Tens of thousands more have died since as a result of bomb-related injuries from blast, fire, and radiation.[86] Although both cities are now thriving modern metropolises, magnificent testaments to the resiliency of the human spirit, their citizens have made sure that their special places in history are remembered. The people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, led by the hibakusha, have engaged in a valiant struggle against forgetting. Akira Kurosawa expresses their dilemma in *Rhapsody in August*, his powerful 1995 film about the younger generation’s encounter with the history of Nagasaki, in a voice-over during a scene where sightseers casually stroll around and photograph monuments in the Nagasaki Peace

Park. The narrator observes, “But nowadays, for most people... Nagasaki happened once upon a time. As the years pass, people are apt to forget...even the most dreadful things.” Many never learn them in the first place. Public opinion polls show that over one-third of U.S. citizens don’t know that Hiroshima was the site of the first atomic attack, with the numbers rising to well over 40 percent among those aged 18-29. Or consider the jubilation of many Indians and Pakistanis upon learning that their countries had successfully tested nuclear weapons in 1998, a reaction that reflects the growing belief that acquisition of nuclear weapons is the quickest route to international respectability. Equally uncomprehending was General Mirza Aslam Berg, retired chief of Pakistan’s armed forces, who dismissed fears of nuclear war between those two nuclear powers, commenting, “I don’t know what you’re worried about. You can die crossing the street, hit by a car, or you could die in a nuclear war. You’ve got to die someday, anyway.”[87] Even more ominous is the Bush administration’s 2001 Nuclear Posture Review, which virtually eliminates the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons and dramatically lowers the bar to nuclear weapons’ use, in March 1946, Lewis Mumford, already horrified by the orgy of destruction Truman had unleashed and appalled by the announcement of additional bomb tests, published a passionate piece in Saturday Review that charged,

We in America are living among madmen. Madmen govern our affairs in the name of order and security. The chief madmen claim the titles of general, admiral, senator, scientist, administrator, Secretary of State, even President. And the fatal symptom of their madness is this: they have been carrying through a series of acts which will lead eventually to the destruction of mankind, under the solemn conviction that they are normal responsible people, living sane lives, and working for reasonable ends.

Soberly, day after day, the madmen continue to go through the undeviating motions of madness: motions so stereotyped, so commonplace, that they seem the normal motions of normal men, not the mass compulsions of people bent on total death. Without a public mandate of any kind, the madmen have taken it upon themselves to lead us by gradual stages to that final act of madness which will corrupt the face of the earth and blot out the nations of men, possibly put an end to all life on the planet itself.[88]

Stanley Kubrick came to the same realization two decades later, understanding that he had to make *Dr. Strangelove* as a black comedy because planning for nuclear annihilation had to be the work of madmen. Year after year, when I started taking my students to the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Museum, I caught myself copying the same label because in its ludicrous disproportionality it represented the logical culmination of the process unleashed by Truman in 1945--that by 1985 the destructive power of the world’s nuclear arsenals had reached the equivalent of 1.47 million Hiroshima bombs.



Dr. Strangelove

The point of the apocalyptic narrative is not simply to blame Harry Truman for the present nuclear insanity. Clearly, many share

responsibility for a state of affairs in which nine nations have nuclear weapons, and numerous others are maneuvering to join this not-so-exclusive club. Nor is it to question Americans' wartime valor, downplay Japan's responsibility for its cruel treatment of other Asian peoples and of Allied prisoners, overlook Stalin's interest in keeping the Pacific War going until the Soviet invasion of Manchuria had at least begun, or minimize the culpability of Emperor Hirohito and other Japanese leaders for prolonging the war in complete disregard of the well-being of the Japanese people. Similarly, it is not simply to condemn the needless death and ongoing suffering of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian victims, whose anguish and misery must be remembered and mourned along with the death and suffering of tens of millions of victims on all sides. The real lesson is that Harry Truman chose to use atomic bombs instead of attempting other potentially viable means to end the war despite his understanding, on some level, of what his decision augured for the future.

Is there any reason, particularly given the fact that postwar presidents have almost unanimously applauded Truman's decision, to think that other presidents would not have acted as Truman did or that future presidents won't respond similarly when confronted with difficult circumstances? Is there any reason to think that George W. Bush, for example, would show greater restraint in using nuclear weapons? Is George Bush more ethical than Harry Truman? More compassionate? More knowledgeable? Wiser? More contemplative? Less impulsive? More nuanced in his understanding of foreign affairs? More inclined toward diplomacy? Can one really have confidence in the clarity and depth of Bush's understanding of world affairs when he astonishingly claims he decided to invade Iraq after he gave Saddam Hussein "a chance to allow the inspectors in, and he wouldn't let them in?"[89] Should such a man really have

veto power over the future existence of the human species?

The same could be asked about most postwar presidents, whose accession to power has depended, like Truman's, much more on cronyism with and willingness to do the bidding of political, military, and financial elites than on intellectual and moral qualifications. And it could certainly be asked about the heads of state of other nuclear powers.

Such concerns are reinforced by the fact that use of atomic bombs has been seriously contemplated and/or threatened by almost every postwar president--by Truman during the Soviet blockade of Berlin in 1948, by Truman and Eisenhower over Korea, by Eisenhower administration officials in support of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, by Eisenhower during the Lebanon crisis in 1958 and in response to a threatened Chinese invasion of Quemoy and Matsu in 1954 and 1958, by Kennedy during the Berlin crisis in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, by Johnson to defend marines at Khe Sanh, Vietnam in 1968, by Nixon and Kissinger against the North Vietnamese between 1969 and 1972, by Nixon to deter Soviet actions on several occasions between 1969 and 1973, by Carter in Iran in 1980, by George H.W. Bush and Clinton in Iraq, and by George W. Bush in wholesale fashion in the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review and afterwards. As Daniel Ellsberg has astutely argued, it is a mistake to say that the U.S. has not "used" nuclear weapons since Nagasaki. Ellsberg contends, "Again and again, generally in secret from the American public, U.S. nuclear weapons have been used, for quite different purposes: in the precise way that a gun is used when you point it at someone's head in a direct confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled." [90]

Hence, the likelihood exists that, so long as nuclear weapons remain in the arsenals of the United States and other nations, they will be



used and with consequences potentially far more dire than the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That Harry Truman could act in so malign a fashion, provoking the outrage and condemnation of military, religious, and scientific leaders, as well as ordinary citizens, in the U.S. and abroad, only suggests what other world leaders will be capable of doing if such weapons remain at their disposal.

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### **Notes**

[ 1] Arthur Holly Compton, *Atomic Quest: A Personal Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 128. Scientists never completely ruled out the possibility of this ultimate catastrophe. At the Trinity test, Enrico Fermi and others still contemplated the minuscule chance this could occur and James Conant, stunned by the “enormity of the light,” momentarily feared they had ignited the world. James G. Hershberg, *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 232.

[2] Harry S. Truman, *1945: Memoirs: 1945 Year of Decisions, Vol. 1* (New York: New American Library, 1955), 21.

[3] Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On*

*Active Service in Peace and War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 634-5.

[4] Harry S. Truman, “Why I Dropped the Bomb,” *Parade*, 4 December 1988. Bart Bernstein, who brought this article to my attention, cautions that Margaret Truman’s editing may have influenced the wording.

[5] Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1980), 55.

[6] Sadao Asada, “The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches: Japanese and American Perceptions of the Atomic Bomb Decision, 1945-1995,” in Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds., *Living With the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 179. For an interesting discussion of Truman’s repeated use of the “sleep” metaphor, see Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 176. Some scholars have suggested that Truman was more conflicted about this decision than he admitted. See Lifton and Mitchell, 148-9, 188-192 and Gar Alperovitz, “Was Harry Truman a Revisionist on Hiroshima?” *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Newsletter* 29(June 1998), 1-9.

[7] John W. Dower, “Triumphal and Tragic Narratives of the War in Asia,” in Hein and Selden, eds., *Living With the Bomb*, 37-51. For an expanded version of this analysis, see John W. Dower, “Three Narratives of Our Humanity,” in Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 63-96.

[8] Lifton and Mitchell, 6-7. Truman’s anger toward the Japanese surfaced frequently. Shortly after Nagasaki, Truman defended the bombings in a letter to the Federal Council of

Churches, explaining, "I was greatly disturbed over the unwarranted attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor and murder of our prisoners of war. The only language they seem to understand is the one we have been using to bombard them. When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast." Quoted in Barton J. Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs* 74(January/February 1995), 152.

[9] Michael S. Sherry, "Patriotic Orthodoxy and American Decline," in Hein and Selden, eds., *Living With the Bomb*, 143-4, 149; Lifton and Mitchell, 240.

[ 10] George H. Roeder, "Making Things Visible: Learning from the Censors," in Hein and Selden, eds., *Living With the Bomb*, 89.

[1 1] Barton J. Bernstein, "A Postwar Myth: 500,000 U.S. Lives Saved," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 42(June/July 1986), 38-40; Bernstein, "Reconsidering 'Invasion Most Costly': Popular-History Scholarship, Publishing Standards, and the claim of High U.S. Casualty Estimates to Help Legitimize the Atomic Bombings," *Peace and Change* 24(April 1999), 220-248; Asada, "The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyche," 182; Sherry, "Patriotic Orthodoxy and American Decline," 144. For one of many challenges to Bernstein's "low-end casualty estimates," see Michael Kort, "Casualty Projections for the Invasion of Japan, Phantom Estimates, and the Math of Barton Bernstein," *Passport: The Newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* 34(December 2003), 4-12.

[12] Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb: And the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 326. [Hereafter referred to as *Decision*.]

[ 13] Lane Fenrich, "Mass Death in Miniature: How Americans Became Victims of the Bomb," in Hein and Selden, eds., *Living With the Bomb*,

127.

[ 14] George H. Roeder, Jr., *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 14; Laura Hein and Mark Selden, "Commemoration and Silence: Fifty Years of Remembering the Bomb in America and Japan," in Hein and Selden, eds., *Living With the Bomb*, 25.

[15] Nozaki Yoshiko and Inokuchi Hiromitsu, "Japanese Education, Nationalism, and Ienaga Saburo's Textbook Lawsuits"; Gavan McCormack, "The Japanese Movement to 'Correct' History"; Laura Hein and Mark Selden, "The Lesson of War, Global Power, and Social Change" all in Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds., *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000).

[ 16] Monica Braw, "Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Voluntary Silence," in Hein and Selden, eds., *Living With the Bomb*, 158.

[ 17] Hugh Gusterson, "Remembering Hiroshima at a Nuclear Weapons Laboratory," in Hein and Selden, eds., *Living With the Bomb*, 264,267.

[18] See Robert Jay Lifton, "The Image of 'The End of the World': A Psychohistorical View," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 24(Winter 1985), 70-90; Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection* (New York, 1979), especially chapters 22 and 23; Spencer R. Weart, *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Ira Chernus, *Nuclear Madness: Religion and the Psychology of the Nuclear Age* (Albany, 1991); James Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe* (New York, 1930); Arthur Eddington, *The Expanding Universe* (Cambridge, 1933); Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper: A Study and a Confession* (New York, 1929); Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York, 1929).

- [19] For the full report of the Committee on Social and Political Implications chaired by James Franck, see the appendix to Alice Kimball Smith, *A Peril and A Hope: The Scientists' Movement in America: 1945-47* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 560-572.
- [20] Jeremy Bernstein, *Hans Bethe: Prophet of Energy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 73. Bethe and Teller recalled that immediate development of the hydrogen bomb was a principal topic of conversation between Oppenheimer and Compton in their summer 1942 meeting. Stanley A. Blumberg and Gwinn Owens, *Energy and Conflict: The Life and Times of Edward Teller* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976), 116-119.
- [21] Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, *American Prometheus; The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 188.
- [22] Text of petition in Robert C. Williams and Philip L. Cantelon, eds., *The American Atom: A Documentary History of Nuclear Policies from the Discovery of Fission to the Present 1939-1984* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 67.
- [23] Quoted in Barton J. Bernstein, "Four Physicists and the Bomb: The Early Years, 1945-1950," *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* 18(No.2, 1988), 236.
- [24] Henry L. Stimson diaries, May 31, 1945, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.
- [25] Bird and Sherwin, 293.
- [26] John Morton Blum, ed., *The Price of Vision: The Diary of Henry A. Wallace 1942-1946* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 630.
- [27] Harry S. Truman, 462.
- [28] Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973), 5.
- [29] Steve Kettmann, "Politics 2000," [www.salon.com/politics2000/feature/2000/03/20/rice](http://www.salon.com/politics2000/feature/2000/03/20/rice).
- [30] For a discussion of the controversy sparked by McCullough's biography, see Philip Nobile, "On the Steps of the Smithsonian: Hiroshima Denial in America's Attic," in Philip Nobile, ed., *Judgment at the Smithsonian* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1995), lxii-lxv. For a more reliable treatment of Truman, see Arnold S. Offner, *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- [31] Harry S. Truman, 20.
- [32] Leslie R. Groves, *Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 265.
- [33] Robert Jungk, *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, Inc.), 208.
- [34] Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey, "The Fight Over the Atom Bomb," *Look* 27(August 13, 1963), 20. For Groves's explanation to Truman, see Alperovitz, *Decision*, 780, n39.
- [35] Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Random House, 1977), 62.
- [36] See Alperovitz, *Decision*; Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and the Origins of the Arms Race* (New York: Random House, 1987); Michael S. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of*

Armageddon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Ronald Takaki, *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995). For somewhat more tempered views, see J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt & Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); John Ray Skates, *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

[37] Douglas MacArthur to Herbert Hoover, December 2, 1960, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, Post-Presidential Papers, Individual File Series, Box 129 G. Douglas MacArthur 1953-1964 folder [3212 (3)]. I thank Uday Mohan for bringing this letter to my attention. MacArthur's insistence on this point never wavered over the years. After a long talk with MacArthur in May 1946, Hoover had written in his diary: "I told MacArthur of my memorandum of mid-May 1945 to Truman, that peace could be had with Japan by which our major objectives would be accomplished. MacArthur said that was correct and that we would have avoided all the losses, the Atomic bomb, and the entry of Russia into Manchuria." Alperovitz, *Decision*, 350-51.

[38] Barton J. Bernstein, "The Struggle Over History: Defining the Hiroshima Narrative," in Philip Nobile, ed., *Judgment at the Smithsonian* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1995), 142.

[49] Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and Japan's Surrender in the Pacific War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 37.

[40] "Russo-Japanese Relations (13-20 July 1945), Publication of Pacific Strategic Intelligence Section, Commander-In-Chief United States Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations, 21 July 1945, SRH-085, Record Group 457, Modern Military Branch, National

Archives.

[41] Alperovitz, *Decision*, 27.

[42] Allen Dulles, *The Secret Surrender* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 255-256.

[43] Ferrell, 53.

[44] Alperovitz, *Decision*, 415. Walter Brown wrote in his diary on July 24, 1945, "JFB told more about Jap peace bid to Russia. Japanese Ambassador to Russia warned his government that same thing which happened to Germany would happen to Japan if she stayed in the war. Emperor had said they would fight to the last man unless there was some modifications of unconditional surrender." Hasegawa, 157; Richard Frank downplays the influence on U.S. policymakers of intercepted Japanese diplomatic messages signaling Japan's willingness to surrender if the U.S. guaranteed the status of the emperor, citing General John Weckerling's dismissive July 13 analysis in which Joseph Grew concurred. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, however, disputes Frank's interpretation, noting that Stimson, Forrestal, McCloy, and Naval Intelligence drew very different conclusions from Togo's July 12 telegram. Richard Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Random House, 1999), 221-247; Hasegawa, 134.

[45] "Japan Beaten Before Atom Bomb, Byrnes Says, Citing Peace Bids," *New York Times*, 30 August 1945, 1.

[46] Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 160-165; Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, "The Atomic Bombs and Soviet Entry into the War Against Japan: Which Was More Important on Japan's Decision to Surrender in the Pacific War?" paper delivered at workshop "The End of the Pacific War Revisited," Santa Barbara, California, April 2001.

[47] Ferrell, 53.

[48] Alperovitz, *Decision*, 124. In his “two-step logic,” Alperovitz argues that policymakers understood that the combination of Soviet declaration of war against Japan and mitigation of the demand for unconditional surrender would likely have produced Japanese surrender without use of the bombs. Alperovitz, *Decision*, 114-115.

[49] Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 208.

[50] *Ibid.*, 237.

[51] Groves, 271. Leahy made his ideas known to several people prior to the use of the bomb. It is likely, though not certain, that he expressed his views directly to Truman. For the circumstantial evidence supporting this thesis, see Alperovitz, *Decision*, 325-326.

[52] William D. Leahy, *I Was There: The Personal Story of the Chief of Staff to Presidents Roosevelt and Truman Based on His Notes and Diaries Made at the Time* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1950), 441. Historians have discovered no convincing evidence that Leahy shared his ethical abhorrence of the atomic bomb with Truman or his military colleagues prior to its use on Hiroshima, but, for indications that he may have expressed his views, see Alperovitz, *Decision*, 324-326.

[53] Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956: The White House Years* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 312-313.

[54] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier, General of the Army, President-Elect, 1890-1952* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 426. After maintaining the accuracy of this account for over a decade, Ambrose informed Gar Alperovitz in 1995 that he now doubted that Eisenhower spoke directly to Truman, despite Eisenhower’s insistence that he did so. See, Alperovitz, *Decision*, p.358.

[55] H. H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 598.

[56] “Giles Would Rule Japan A Century,” *New York Times*, 21 September 1945, 4.

[57] Barton J. Bernstein, “Hiroshima, Rewritten,” *New York Times* 31 January 1995, 21.

[58] Alperovitz, *Decision*, 359.

[59] Leahy, 384-385.

[60] Herbert Hoover to John Callan O’Laughlin, 8 August 1945, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa, Post-Presidential Papers, Individual File Series, Box 171. For an extensive review of the conservative critique of the atomic bombings, see Leo Maley III and Uday Mohan, “An Extraordinary Reversal: American Conservatives and Hiroshima,” paper presented at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, 9 January 1999.

[61] Medford Evans, “Hiroshima Saved Japan,” *National Review*, 14 February 1959, 525.

[62] Edward Teller to George Wald, December 12, 1969, “Teller, Edward” Folder, Box 19, George Wald Papers, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[63] Studies by Herbert Bix, Sadao Asada, Bart Bernstein, and Richard Frank cast doubt on the assertion that the Japanese were on the verge of surrender prior to Hiroshima, though Bix doubts they would have held out until the November start date for the invasion and Bernstein believes that a combination of factors would “very likely” have ended the war prior to November 1 without the atomic bombs. Groundbreaking recent scholarship by Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, making use of Japanese, Russian, and American archival sources, demonstrates that Soviet entry into the war had a far more

profound effect on Japanese leaders than did the atomic bombings. Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 487-530; Bix, "Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Spring 1995), 197-225; Sadao Asada "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender—A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review* 67(November 1998), 477-512; Barton Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Spring 1995), 227-273; Frank, *Downfall*; Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*; Hasegawa, "The Atomic Bombs and Soviet Entry into the War Against Japan."

[64] Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

[65] Boyer, 5.

[66] *Ibid.*

[67] Donald Porter Geddes, ed., *The Atomic Age Opens* (New York: Pocket Books, 1945), 159.

[68] Boyer, 7.

[69] "Oxnam, Dulles Ask Halt in Bomb Use," *New York Times*, 10 August 1945, 6.

[70] Lifton and Mitchell, 33.

[71] "Last Judgment," *Washington Post*, 8 August, 1945, 4B.

[72] Arthur Compton to Henry A. Wallace, September 27, 1945. Copy in Arthur Compton Papers, Washington University in St. Louis Archives. I am grateful to Daniel Ellsberg for bringing this document to my attention.

[73] Felicity Barringer, "Journalism's Greatest Hits: Two Lists of a Century's Top Stories," *New York Times*, 1 March 1999, C1; Ran Fuchs, "Journalism names Top 100 works of the century," *Washington Square News*, 2 March 1999, 1.

[74] Harry S. Truman, 465.

[75] Nathan Reingold, "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Meets the Atom Bomb," in Terry Shinn and Richard Whitley, eds., *Expository Science: Forms and Functions of Popularisation* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1985), 238-239.

[76] John Toland, *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire 1936-1945* (New York: Random House), 766n.

[77] Wayne Phillips, "Truman Disputes Eisenhower on '48," *New York Times*, 3 February 1958, 16.

[78] Bird and Sherwin, 332.

[79] Elting E. Morison, *Turmoil and Tradition: A Study of the Life and Times of Henry L. Stimson* (Boston, 1960), 618.

[80] Stimson diaries, May 28, 1945.

[81] Morison, 618.

[82] Hershberg, 295.

[83] Stimson and Bundy, 629.

[84] Henry Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Harper's* 194(February 1947), 107.

[85] Margaret Truman, 555.

[86] Hiroshima and Nagasaki casualty estimates vary widely and are difficult to determine precisely. See John Dower, "Three Narratives of Our Humanity," in Edward T.

Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York:Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 79 Note 28. For somewhat lower estimates, see Frank, *Downfall*, 285-287.

[87] "Life on the Nuclear Edge," *Nation*, 24 June 2002, 3.

[88] Lewis Mumford, "Gentlemen: You Are Mad!" *Saturday Review of Literature* 29(2 March 1946), 5.

[89] Dana Priest and Dana Milbank, "President Defends Allegation On Iraq: Bush Says CIA's Doubts Followed Jan. 28 Address," *Washington*

*Post*, 15 July 2003, 1.

[90] Daniel Ellsberg, "Introduction: Call to Mutiny," in E. P. Thompson and Dan Smith, eds., *Protest and Survive* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981), i. For discussion of the occasions on which such used was considered, see pp. v-vi. The Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum lists several other occasions in which the U.S. considered using nuclear weapons, including against Soviet forces stationed in Iran in 1946, in response to the shooting down of an American plane over Yugoslavia later that year, at the inauguration of the president of Uruguay in 1948, to prevent Guatemala's aligning with the Soviet Union in 1954, when North Korea seized the American vessel *Pueblo* in 1968, and during the invasion of Syrian troops into Jordan in 1970.