

Why I Dropped the Bomb **By Harry S Truman**

Just about all the fighting in the world is caused by the lack of enough to eat, enough to wear, and the lack of a good place to live, but if atomic energy is used the way it ought to be, it can save the whole world from fighting each other to get what's necessary for people to have. It can do unbelievable good for the world, if people can be persuaded to get along by looking at examples of the times they didn't get along and were wiped out and destroyed as a result.

The same thing can happen now, except this time it will wipe out the whole population of the world if we go to war with this atomic energy we turned loose.

I was the President who made the decision to unleash that terrible power, of course, and it was a difficult and dreadful decision to have to make. Some people have the mistaken impression that I made it on my own and in haste and almost on impulse, but it was nothing like that at all.

If I live to be 100 years old, I'll never forget the day that I was first told about the atomic bomb. It was about 7:30 p.m. on the evening of April 12, 1945, just hours after Franklin Roosevelt had died at 3:35 p.m., and no more than half an hour after I was sworn in as President at 7:09 p.m. Henry L. Stimson, who was Roosevelt's Secretary of War and then mine, took me aside and reminded me that Roosevelt had authorized the development of a sort of super-bomb and that that bomb was almost ready. I was still stunned by Roosevelt's death and by the fact that I was now President, and I didn't think much more about it at the time. But then, on April 26, Stimson asked for a meeting in my office, at which he was joined by Major General Leslie Groves, who was in charge of the operation which was developing the bomb, the Manhattan Project. At the meeting, Stimson handed me a memorandum which said: "Within four months we shall in all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history, one bomb which could destroy a whole city."

Stimson said gravely that he didn't know whether we could or should use the bomb, because he was afraid that it was so powerful that it could end up destroying the whole world. I felt the same fear as he and Groves continued to talk about it, and when I read Groves' 24-page report. The report said the first bomb would probably be ready by July and have the strength of about 500 tons of TNT, and, even more frighteningly, that a second bomb would probably be ready by August and have the strength of as much as 1200 tons of TNT. We weren't aware then that that was just the tip of the iceberg. That second bomb turned out to have the power of 20,000 tons of TNT, and the hydrogen bomb which eventually followed it had the explosive power of 20 million tons of TNT.

Stimson's memo suggested the formation of a committee to assist me in deciding whether to use the bomb on Japan, and I agreed completely. The committee, which we called the Interim Committee, consisted of Stimson as chairman; James F. Byrnes, who later became my Secretary of State, as my representative on the committee; James B. Conant, the president of Harvard; Karl T. Compton, the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Vannevar Bush, the head of our Office of Scientific Research and Development. The Interim Committee in turn called in, for advice and information, the scientists who had developed the bomb: Arthur H. Compton, who was Karl Compton's brother, Enrico Fermi, Ernest O. Lawrence and J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Then, on May 8, my 61st birthday, the Germans surrendered, and I had to remind our country that the war was only half over, that we still had to face the war with Japan. The winning of that war, we all know, might even be more difficult to accomplish, because the Japanese were self-proclaimed fanatic warriors who made it all too clear that they preferred death to defeat in battle. Just a month before, after our soldiers and Marines landed on Okinawa, the Japanese lost 100,000 men out of the 120,000 in their garrison, and yet, though they were defeated without any questions, thousands more fell on their grenades and died rather than surrender.

Nevertheless, I pleaded with the Japanese in my speech announcing Germany's surrender, begging them to surrender too, but I was not too surprised when they refused. On June 18, I met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to discuss what I hoped would be our final push against the Japanese. We still hadn't

decided whether to use the atomic bomb, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff suggested that we plan an attack 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 bomb. The Joint Chiefs of Staff estimated that the Japanese had 5000 attack planes, 17 garrisons on the island of Kyushu alone, and a total of more than 2 million men on all of the islands of Japan. General [George Marshall] estimated that, since the Japanese would fight more fiercely than ever on their own homeland, we would probably lose 250,000 men and possibly as many as 500,000 in taking the two islands. I could not bear this thought, and it led to the decision to drop the atomic bomb.

We talked first about blockading Japan and trying to blast them into surrender with conventional weaponry; but Marshall and others made it clear that this would never work – pointing out that the Germans hadn't surrendered until we got troops into Germany itself. Another general pointed out that Germany's munitions industries were more apart and harder to hit than Japan's. When we finally talked about the atomic bomb, on July 21, and came to the awful conclusion that it would probably be the only way the Japanese might be made to surrender quickly, we talked first about hitting some isolated, low population area where there would not be too many casualties but the Japanese could see the power of the new weapon. Reluctantly, we decided against that as well, feeling it wouldn't be enough to convince the fanatical Japanese. We finally selected four possible target areas, all heavy military- manufacturing areas: Hiroshima, Kokura, Nagasaki and Niigata.

I know the world will never forget that the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6 and the second on Nagasaki on August 9. One more plea for surrender had been made to the Japanese on July 29 and 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 Japanese surrendered five days after the bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, and a number of major Japanese military men and diplomats later confided publicly that there would have been no quick surrender without it. For this reason, I made what I believed to be the only possible decision.

In a speech I made at a major university in 1965, I said:

"It was a question of saving hundreds of thousands of American lives . . . You don't feel normal when you have to plan hundreds of thousands of . . . deaths of American boys who are alive and joking and having fun while you're doing your planning. You break your heart and your head trying to figure out a way to save one life . . . The name given to our invasion plan was Olympic, but I saw nothing godly about the killing of all the people that would be necessary to make that invasion. The casualty estimates called for 750,000 American casualties – 250,000 killed, 500,000 maimed for life . . . I couldn't worry about what history would say about my personal morality. I made the only decision I ever knew how to make. I did what I thought was right."

I still think that.