Excerpts Regarding the Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

Harry S Truman, *Memoirs, Volume I: Year of Decisions* (1955)

It was my decision then that the proclamation to Japan should be issued from the forthcoming conference at Potsdam. This, I believed, would clearly demonstrate to Japan and to the world that the Allies were united in their purpose. By that time, also, we might know more about two matters of significance for our future effort: the participation of the Soviet Union and the atomic bomb. We knew that the bomb would receive its first test in mid-July. If the test of the bomb was successful, I wanted to afford Japan a clear chance to end the fighting before we made use of this newly gained power. If the test should fail, then it would be even more important to us to bring about a surrender before we had to make a physical conquest of Japan. General Marshall told me that it might cost half a million American lives to force the enemy's surrender on his home grounds.

But the test was now successful. The entire development of the atomic bomb had been dictated by military considerations…

My own knowledge of these developments had come about only after I became President, when Secretary Stimson had given me the full story... It was at his suggestion, too, that I had then set up a committee of top men and had asked them to study with great care the implications the new weapon might have for us. It was their recommendation that the bomb be used against the enemy as soon as it could be done. They recommended further that it should be used without specific warning and against a target that would clearly show its devastating strength. I had realized, of course, that an atomic bomb explosion would inflict damage and casualties beyond imagination. On the other hand, the scientific advisers of the committee reported, "We can propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use." It was their conclusion that no technical demonstration they might propose, such as over a deserted island, would be likely to bring the war to an end. It had to be used against an enemy target.

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. The top military advisers to the President recommended its use, and when I talked to Churchill he unhesitatingly told me he favored the use of the atomic bomb if it might aid to end the war."

Henry Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Bomb" *Harpers*, February 1947

Two great nations were approaching contact in a fight to a finish which would begin on November 1, 1945. Our enemy, Japan, commanded forces of somewhat over 5,000,000 men. Men of these armies had already inflicted upon us, in our breakthrough of the outer perimeter of their defenses, over 300,000 battle casualties. Enemy armies still unbeaten had the strength to cost us a million more. As long as the Japanese government refused to surrender, we should be forced to take and hold the ground, and smash the Japanese ground armies, by close-in fighting of the same desperate and costly kind that we had faced in the Pacific islands for nearly four years…

In order to end the war in the shortest possible time and to avoid the enormous losses of human life which otherwise confronted us, I felt that we must use the Emperor as our

instrument to command and compel his people to cease fighting and subject themselves to our authority through him, and that to accomplish this we must give him and his controlling advisers a compelling reason to accede to our demands. This reason furthermore must be of such a nature that his people could understand his decision. The bomb seemed to me to furnish a unique instrument for that purpose.

My chief purpose was to end the war in victory with the least possible cost in the lives of the men in the armies which I had helped to raise."

Dwight Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change* (1963) p. 380

"In [July] 1945... Secretary of War Stimson, visiting my headquarters in Germany, informed me that our government was preparing to drop an atomic bomb on Japan. I was one of those who felt that there were a number of cogent reasons to question the wisdom of such an act. ...the Secretary, upon giving me the news of the successful bomb test in New Mexico, and of the plan for using it, asked for my reaction, apparently expecting a vigorous assent.

During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so 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'."

Admiral William Leahy (Chief of Staff to Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman), *I Was There* (1979), p. 441.

"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 because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons. The lethal possibilities of atomic warfare in the future are frightening. 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."

Undersecretary of State Joseph Grew (February 12, 1947 letter to Henry Stimson)

"...in the light of available evidence I myself and others felt that if such a categorical statement about the [retention of the] dynasty had been issued in May, 1945, the surrender-minded elements in the [Japanese] Government might well have been afforded by such a statement a valid reason and the necessary strength to come to an early clearcut decision… If surrender could have been brought about in May, 1945, or even in June or July, before the entrance of Soviet Russia into the [Pacific] war and the use of the atomic bomb, the world would have been the gainer."

Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy (quoted in James Reston, *Deadline*, p. 500)

"I have always felt that if, in our ultimatum to the Japanese government issued from Potsdam [in July 1945], we had referred to the retention of the emperor as a constitutional monarch and had made some reference to the reasonable accessibility of raw materials to the future Japanese government, it would have been accepted. Indeed, I believe that even in the form it was delivered, there was some disposition on the part of the Japanese to give it favorable consideration. When

the war was over I arrived at this conclusion after talking with a number of Japanese officials who had been closely associated with the decision of the then Japanese government, to reject the ultimatum, as it was presented. I believe we missed the opportunity of effecting a Japanese surrender, completely satisfactory to us, without the necessity of dropping the bombs.

Harry Truman's Diary, July 17, 1945

"I told Stalin that I am no diplomat but usually said yes & no to questions after hearing all the argument. It pleased him. I asked him if he had the agenda for the meeting. He said he had and that he had some more questions to present. I told him to fire away. He did and it is dynamite - but I have some dynamite too which I'm not exploding now.
He'll be in the Jap War on August 15th. Fini Japs when that comes about."

Harry Truman Letter to Bess Truman, July 18, 1945

"...I've gotten what I came for - Stalin goes to war *[against Japan]* August 15 with no strings on it. … I'll say that we'll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won't be killed! That is the important thing."

Harry Truman's Diary, July 18, 1945:

"P.M. *[Prime Minister Winston Churchill]* & I ate alone. Discussed Manhattan (it is a success). Decided to tell Stalin about it. Stalin had told P.M. of telegram from Jap Emperor asking for peace. Stalin also read his answer to me. It was satisfactory. Believe Japs will fold up before Russia comes in. I am sure they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland."

Henry Stimson (Secretary of War) Diary Entries
May 14, 1945

"...at twelve o'clock Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Minister, came in. I had about forty-five minutes with him on general matters but especially S-1 [the atomic bomb]. He brought me messages of congratulation from the Prime Minister *[Winston Churchill]* and said that he would be very glad to convey to him anything that I wanted to tell him about S-1 in which he was deeply interested. I then outlined to him the progress which we have made and the timetable as it stood now, and told him my own feeling as to its bearing upon our present problems of an international character... There we had a talk in general about matters in Europe and particularly Germany and the complications which are being made by Russia's difficulties.

I talked over with Marshall the list of questions which the State Department had fired at me and which I enumerated in my yesterday's diary and we both decided that they were rather impractical to discuss now with anyone. I had a talk with McCloy about them. I told him to look them over and see what he thought of them; if he thought there was anything serious to answer. I told him that my own opinion was that the time now and the method now to deal with Russia was to keep our mouths shut and let our actions speak for words. The Russians will understand them better than anything else. It is a case where we have got to regain the lead and perhaps do it in a pretty rough and realistic way. They have rather taken it away from us because we have talked too much and have been too lavish with our beneficences to them. I told him this was a place where we really held all the cards. I called it a royal straight flush and we mustn't be a fool about the way we play it. They can't get along without our help and industries and we have coming into action a weapon which will be unique. Now the thing is not to get into unnecessary quarrels by talking too much and not to indicate any weakness by talking too much; let our actions speak for themselves."

May 15, 1945 Diary Entry:

"At 9:30 we went into our meeting of the Committee of Three, Grew, Forrestal and myself being present with McCloy as recorder…We had a pretty red hot session first over the questions which Grew had propounded to us in relation to the Yalta Conference and our relations with Russia…I tried to point out the difficulties which existed and I thought it premature to ask those questions; at least we were not yet in a position to answer them. The trouble is that the President has now promised apparently to meet Stalin and Churchill on the first of July *[at the Potsdam Conference]* and at that time these questions will become burning and it may be necessary to have it out with Russia on her relations to Manchuria and Port Arthur and various other parts of North China, and also the relations of China to us. Over any such tangled wave of problems the S-1 secret would be dominant and yet we will not know until after that time probably, until after that meeting, whether this is a weapon in our hands or not. We think it will be shortly afterwards, but it seems a terrible thing to gamble with such big stakes in diplomacy without having your master card in your hand."

Harry Truman, Letter to Bess Truman, July 20, 1945:

"I have to make it perfectly plain to them at least once a day that so far as this President is concerned Santa Claus is dead and that my first interest is U.S.A., then I want the Jap war won and I want them *[Russia and Great Britain]* both in it. Then I want peace - world peace and will do what can be done by us to get it."

Harry Truman, Letter to Bess Truman, July 31, 1945:

"He [Stalin] doesn't know it but I have an ace in the hole and another one showing - so unless he has threes or two pair (and I know he has not) we are sitting all right."

Harry Truman, March 3, 1948, Letter to Margaret Truman

"If there ever was a top secret this is it. Someday I'll have to tell it. As you know I was Vice-President from Jan. 20 to April 12, 1945. I was at Cabinet meetings and saw Roosevelt once or twice in those months. But he never did talk to me confidentially about the war, or about foreign affairs or what he had in mind for the peace after the war….Then I had to start in reading memorandums, briefs, and volumes of correspondence on the World situation. Too bad I hadn't been on the Foreign Affairs Committee or that F.D.R. hadn't informed me on the situation."

Truman Diary, July 25, 1945

We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark.
Anyway we “think” we have found the way to cause a disintegration of the atom. An experiment in the New Mexico desert was startling — to put it mildly. Thirteen pounds of the explosive caused the complete disintegration of a steel tower 60 feet high, created a crater 6 feet deep and 1,200 feet in diameter, knocked over a steel tower 1/2 mile away and knocked men down 10,000 yards away. The explosion was visible for more than 200 miles and audible for 40 miles and more.
This weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10th. I have told the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop that terrible bomb on the old capital or the new.

Harry Truman letter to Senator Richard Russell, August 9, 1945

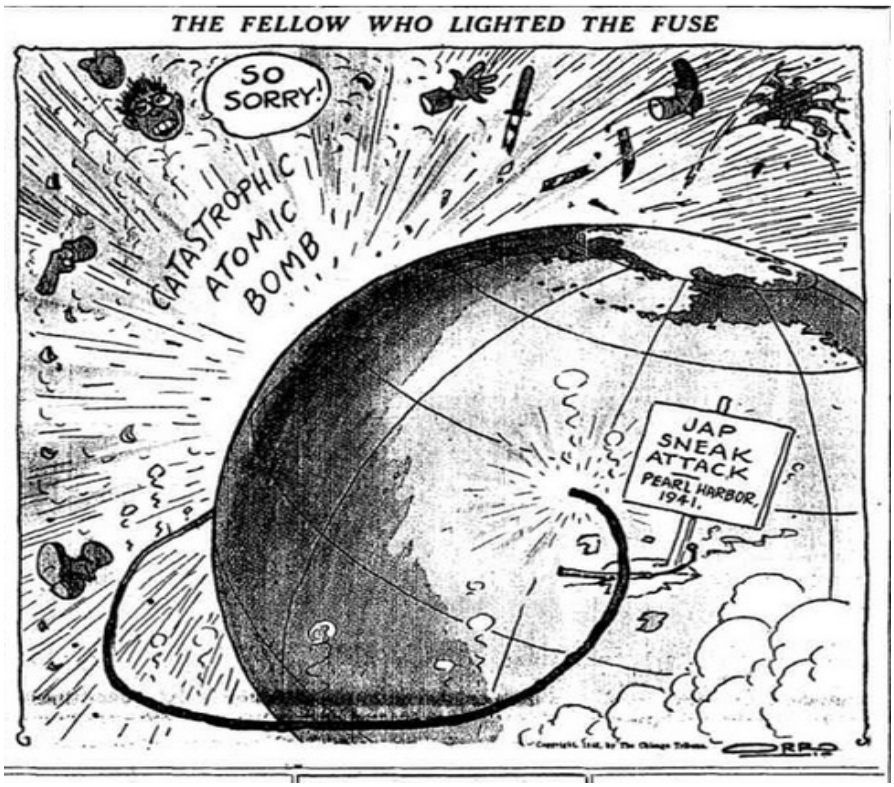
"I know that Japan is a terribly cruel and uncivilized nation in warfare but I can't bring myself to believe that, because they are beasts, we should ourselves act in the same manner. For myself, I

certainly regret the necessity of wiping out whole populations because of the 'pigheadedness' of the leaders and, for your information, I am not going to do it unless it is absolutely necessary. It is my opinion that after the Russians enter into the war, the Japanese will very shortly fold up."

Harry Truman letter to Samuel McCrea Cavert, general secretary of the Federal Council of Churches, August 11, 1945:

"Nobody is more disturbed over the use of Atomic bombs than I am but I was greatly disturbed over the unwarranted attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor and their 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. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true."

Excerpt from public statement by President Truman, August 9, 1945

"The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians. But that attack is only a warning of things to come. If Japan does not surrender, bombs will have to be dropped on her war industries and, unfortunately, thousands of civilian lives will be lost. Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans."

Chicago Tribune, August 8, 1945