William Jones World War II Scrapbook

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THE JOURNAL-GAZETTE
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Why Truman dropped bomb
Invasion specter launched nuclear era 45 years ago

It was the most terrible weapon ever devised, and on Aug. 6, 1945, no one knew what its affects would be. But the new president, Harry Truman, didn't hesitate to order special Bombing Mission No. 13 to go ahead and drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. In this excerpt from the August Washingtonian, Victor Gold offers a detailed account of the deliberations that let up to the fateful move, the pressures on Truman and his aides, and the historical context of World War II that made the bombing necessary. Dialogue ha [[print cut off]]

delivered its cargo. The message, from Stimson in Washington, read in part: "BIG BOMB DROPPED ON HIROSHIMA... FIRST REPORTS INDICATE COMPLETE SUCCESS."

Truman, only four months on the job as resident, pushed his plate aside and turned to the officer who handed him the message. "This," he said, "is the greatest thing in history."

Baffled, the sailors around the table glanced at one another. Moments later, a second message arrived: HIROSHIMA BOMBED VISUALLY...NO FIGHTER OPPOSITION AND NO FLAK. PARSONS REPORTS 15 MINTUES AFTER DROP AS FOLLOWS: RESULTS CLEAR-CUT SUCCESSFUL IN ALL RESPECTS. VISIBLE EFFECTS GREATER THAN IN ANY TEST."

The president read the message, then got up and walked across the mess to the table where Secretary of State James Byrnes was sitting. He showed it to Byrnes, then picked up a fork and rapped it against a glass.

As the room fell silent, he held up the message for everyone to see. "I've just received confirmation from Washington," said the president, "that we've completed a successful bombing mission at Hiroshima, an important Jap army base. One bomb was dropped, and atomic bomb, with more power than 20,000 tons of TNT."

Truman paused to let his words sink in. "What this means," he said, a broad smile on his face as he looked around the room, "is that the war's going to be over a lot sooner than we expected."

Now the crew members of the Augusta were on their feet, cheering.

Clutching the message in one hand and his secretary of state's elbow in

the other, the man who had made the final decision to drop the bomb hustled out of the mess, headed for the officers' wardroom to repeat his announcement.

At the Pentagon, Groves, director of the Manhattan Project, was regaling his subordinates with stories about the trials and tribulations of dealing with "scientific double-domes," when and unexpected visitor walked in.

General Marshall," said Groves, getting to his feet and dismissing his aides. "Great

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news, eh? I understand from Stimson that the president's doing somersaults."

Marshall, the Army chief of staff, held out his hand. A man of daunting reserve, he was a military advisor considered indispensable by two presidents, Franklin Roosevelt and now Truman.

"Congratulations," said Marshall as the ebullient Groves pumped his arm vigorously. "You've done a magnificent job."

The chief of staff continued: "I saw the first draft of your proposed statement for the president."

"And?"
"Do we have any estimates from Tinian," Marshall asked, "on the extent of Japanese casualties?"

"No estimates," Groves said sarcastically. "We didn't get any, and, the last I heard, the Japs hadn't given us any."

Marshall, having dealt with Groves since the Manhattan Project got under way in 1942, ignored the insubordination. He considered Groves, like George Patton, an eccentric whose quirks were tolerable as long as the man produced results and didn't get too far out of line.

"I think we have to be careful," replied Marshall evenly, "not to make the president sound too gratified, as if he's crowing, when Japanese casualties are in the tens, possibly hundreds of thousands."

"Jap casualties?" said Groves, his voice rising. "Hiroshima is a military target, General, headquarters for the enemy's southern army command."

"I understand that," said Marshall, standing to leave. "But we now there'll also be civilian casualties."

Groves, his face flushed, rose from his chair and ground out his cigar. "I'll tell you straight, General," he said. "When I drafted that statement I wasn't thinking about Jap casualties. I was thinking about the poor bastards who died on the Bataan death march."

In May 1942, 10,000 American and Philippine prisoners of war died from starvation, disease, clubbings and bayonet executions in what came to be known at the Bataan death march. This occurred at the same time that civilians in Manila were being brutalized - men beheaded, women raped - by members of the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy.

The official Japanese view was that their country's war against the Americans and British was a racial conflict; Filipinos who allied themselves with the "white intruders" were traitors to their Asian heritage.

Three months earlier, the Japanese military had pursued the same ruthless pattern in conquering Malaya. After his troops had pillaged the city, Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita boasted, "In Singapore, when asked the terms of surrender by the enemy commander, I simply pointed to the document and said, 'Sign here.' I intend to give the same order to the president of the United States at the White House in Washington."

Bataan... Manila... Singapore... Pearl Harbor. But even before the surprise attack on Hawaii, American attitudes towards their enemy in the Far East were being shaped by stories and film of Japanese atrocities in China. There had been the "rape of Nanking" by Japanese troops, with more than 200,000 Chinese civilians slaughtered in 1937; Japan's indiscriminate bombing and strafing of "open cities" in China; the disregard for human life - not only the lives of others but their own as well - shown by Japanese troops and officers under the semi-religious "samurai" code.

The "Japs" were a different kind of enemy from any the American people had ever come up against.

These were the attitudes and images that Truman, the consummate Middle American, brought with him when he became president on April 12, 1945. Within moments of being sworn in by Chief Justice Harlan Stone, Truman called his first Cabinet meeting.

"I need every one of you," the new president said, scanning the stunned, sorrowful faces of Franklin Roosevelt's Cabinet. For 12 years they had known only one president. It would take time to get used to the idea that "The Chief" was gone and someone else was sitting in his place.

My aim, and I know it's yours," he continued, "is to see that President Roosevelt's policies are carried out exactly as he planned."

The sentiment was fine, but as everyone in the room understood Truman knew little about the operation of the Roosevelt White House. As vice president, he was considered a creature of Capitol Hill whose

job was merely to preside over the Senate. He visited 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue infrequently.

But now, for better or worse, Truman was the Chief. When the brief meeting ended, the Cabinet members filed out, except for Stimson, who had something on his mind.

"Mr. President," said Stimson. Truman, startled by the title, swung around, half expecting to find that FDR had entered the room.

"I'd like a few minutes of your time, Mr. President, to discuss - Stimson paused, rubbing his trim mustache, searching for words.

"Yes?" said Truman, knowing that Stimson had something he wanted to say privately, it must be important.

The secretary of war told the new president about the Manhattan Project and a "new kind of bomb that had been developed" with unimaginable explosive power."

"Well, Mr. Secretary, said the president, slipping his glasses back on, "I have a lot to learn and I'd say knowing more about this new bomb is lesson No. 1."

With Nazi resistance collapsing, Truman's attention the first days of his presidency turned to the sharing of postwar Europe. Trouble was brewing with Russia over Stalin's refusal to permit free elections in Poland. And plans for the United Nations - the international organization Roosevelt sw as the key to world peace - were being worked out at a conference in San Francisco.

Nearly two weeks went by before Stimson, along with Groves, met with the president to go into detail about the "new bomb."

The meeting took place in the Oval Office at noon, April 25. Stimson opened by reading a memorandum aimed at getting Truman's attention.

"Within four months," it began, "we shall in all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history, one bomb of which could destroy a whole city."

The bomb's power, Stimson continued, came from "splitting the atom." Scientists in other countries knew the theory of atomic energy, but only the U.S. had the resources to build the bomb.

When Stimson finished, he and Groves handed Truman a report covering the history of the Manhattan Project and the basic principles of nuclear energy. Truman glanced at the cover of the report and said he'd read it later.

"With due respect, Mr. President," said Groves, "you ought to read it now." Stimson nodded in agreement.

The most important issue facing American, said the war secretary, was

whether and how it used its monopoly on atomic power. Truman, his mind on a heated exchange he'd just had with Stalin's foreign minister, was in no mood to plow through a 24-page scientific document. But he respected Stimson's judgment, so he began plowing.

Germany surrendered May 8, but the celebration around the Truman White House was brief. Advice was coming in to the new president from all parts of the foreign-policy establishment on how to deal with the Russians and the quickest way to end the war in the pacific.

On June 1 the Interim Committee, a select group named by the president to counsel him on atomic matters, unanimously recommended that if the A-bomb test scheduled near Alamogordo, New Mexico, in Mid-July proved successful, the bomb should be used on a military target in Japan.

There was no consensus on whether the Japanese should be warned ahead of time or whether the United States should use the term "unconditional surrender" in dealing with the Japanese government.

Some of Truman's advisers thought the U.S. ought to give the Japanese some face-saving way to claim "peace with honor."

But when Winston Churchill used that phrase, Truman snapped, "The Japs lost any honor they had at Pearl Harbor."

A few presidential advisors insisted that it wasn't necessary to use the A-bomb. The enemy could be blockaded and brought to its knees through conventional bombing.

Still others, including Adm. William Leahy, didn't really believe Truman had an A-bomb option. "The damn fool thing isn't going to work," snapped Leahy. "I say this as a lifetime expert on explosives."

Truman listened to all these arguments, then turned to George Marshall.

"What do you think, General?" he asked. "Can we finish them off with blockade and conventional bombing?"

"It didn't work in Germany," replied Marshall. "We leveled their cities, cut off their supplies, and it still took ground forces to finish the job."

"What do you estimate it'll take?" Truman asked. The initial assault on Kyushu Island, said Marshall, quoting a study by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would require over three-quarters of a million men. A later assault on Honshu Island would take at least another quarter million.

Truman nodded, then cleared his throat. "Any estimates," he said, "on casualties?"

"We estimate there are 2 million Japanese troops on the home islands," Marshall replied. "Seventeen divisions on Kyushu alone. About 5,000 planes on stand-by for kamikaze attacks on our ships."

Marshall turned a page in the Joint Chiefs' report. "On Okinawa," he said, "going up against 170,000 enemy defenders, we lost 41,000 men - about 35 percent of our attacking force."

"I'm familiar with those figures, General," said Truman, "but you still haven't answered my question."

"On land and sea," said Marshall, "based on our Okinawa experience: - he paused, looked down the conference table, then at his commander-in-chief - "we'll lose, at a minimum, half-a-million men."

The only question left after the successful Alamogordo test was where and when to use the bomb. Hiroshima, as the key port and nerve center of Japanese military operations in southern Japan, was the obvious first target.

But Truman delayed a final decision until Tokyo had a chance to respond to the Potsdam Proclamation warning of the "utter destruction of the Japanese homeland" unless the enemy surrendered unconditionally.

On the last day of the Potsdam conference, Truman took Stalin aside. The Soviet leader, as he later told his foreign minister, V.M. Molotov, expected the American to try to pin him down on the date Russia would enter the war against Japan.

Instead, Truman informed Stalin that America had "a new weapon of unusual destructive force." Stalin merely nodded and said, "Fine, I hope you use it against the Japanese."

On the morning of Aug. 4, 1945, American planes dropped nearly three-quarters of a million leaflets

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on Hiroshima, warning residents that their city faced destruction unless their government surrendered at once.

A million leaflets carrying a similar message were dropped on Tokyo.

The warning was ignored.
At 8:15 a.m., Aug. 6, The B-29 bomber Enola Gay, piloted by Col. Paul Tibbets Jr., dropped the world's first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, killing 100,000 people immediately.

Another 100,000 were to die from radioactive aftereffects.

In the 24 hours following the Hiroshima raid, Truman, headed home aboard the Augusta, watched and waited while renewed appeals were

made for Japan's surrender..

In Tokyo, Prime Minister Kantoro Suzuke, after notifying Emperor Hirohito of his intention, called an emergency meeting of the Japanese cabinet on Aug. 9.

"I have concluded," he said, "that our only alternative is to accept the Potsdam Proclamation and terminate the war. I would like to hear your opinions on this."

No one spoke up. Then after another request for opinions, three military men in the Cabinet objected to any talk of surrender.

When a junior officer entered the Cabinet room a few minutes later and reported that a second A-bomb had been dropped on the city of Nagasaki, Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo again asked for consideration of the Potsdam offer.

Instead, War Minister Gen. Korechika Anami called for total mobilization of both military and civilian forces to fight one last battle on the Tokyo plains.

"We will inflict severe losses on the enemy when he invades Japan," sand Anami.

He paused to let his final words register with Suzuki and others in the room who favored surrender.

"In any case," said the war minister, "our men will simply refuse to lay down their arms. They know they are forbidden to surrender. There is really no alternative for us, but to continue the war."

Even after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese Cabinet was deadlocked.

Only the emperor could make the final decision.
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"I cannot bear to see my innocent people suffer any longer. Exiting the war is the only way to restore world peace and to relieve the nation from the terrible dist[?] with which it is burdened."
Hirohito to the Japanese Supreme Council, Aug. 9. 1945.
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The emperor had decided, but the argument still wasn't over. Key leaders in the Japanese military hoped to continue the war.

On the night of Aug. 14, junior officers of the Konoye Division attempted to kidnap the emperor in preparation for a suicide defense of the homeland.

The coup narrowly failed.

On Aug. 9, the Soviet Union, realizing that the war was coming to an end, invaded Manchuria.

Under the terms of the secret Roosevelt-Stalin protocol of Yalta, this guaranteed the cessation of the Kurile Islands to Russia.

But when the Soviets demanded the right to share military occupation of p[?] Japan, their demands were [[?]] by Truman and Supreme [[?]] Commander Douglas MacArthur.

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"(Bomb inventor R [[?]]
Oppenheimer told me he had [[?]]
on his hands. I told him, [[?]]
did, professor, was make [[?]]
I'm the guy who made the [[?]]
to drop it. And if America [[?]]
were on the line and I had [[?]]
the same decision again, I [[?]]
it (snaps fingers) like that [[?]]
Truman to Dean Acheson, [[?]]
[/article]]

[[Crossword Puzzle]]
Crossword answers on Page 8C
Edited by James C. Boldt and Joyce Nichols Lewis
By Frances Hansen
ACROSS
1 Related
5 Drink noisily
10 Turkish title
13 Born to the purple
18 "-- fan tutte" Mozart opera
19 European blackbird: Var.
20 Do in, comics style
21 Each
22 Tuchman Pulitzer book: 1962
26 Honeydew or casaba
27 Walks rapidly
28 Russian ruler of yore
29 Hollywood's Brando
30 Ricky Ricardo's wife
31 "The Emerald Isle"
32 Mod. housing
33 Common vipers

75 Portnoy's creator and family
77 Conducted

78 Automobile pioneer
79 Kind of oil
80 Call - day
81 With 101 Across 1956 film
86 "- la vista!"
87 Broad scenic view
89 Free-for-all
90 Huston or Pidgeon
91 High intensity stage fare
92 Shape
93 Italian actress Virna
94 Mountain ashes
96 "- all come out in the wash"
97 "Seward's Folly"
100 Chimp's cousin
101 See 81 Across
107 1984 B'way show, with "The"
108 Mild cigar
109 Border on
110 Gantry or Fudd
111 Oahu garland
112 Ireland's De Valera
113 Amsterdam's nat.

DOWN
1 Take steps
2 West Germany's Chandellor
3 Crystal gazer's phrase
4 Carping commentators
5 Science of acoustics
6 Robust
7 G.I.s dance hall
8 Grid monitor
9 Tableland
10 Sky-blue
11 Shoot the breeze
12 Likely
13 Sent back into
14 Attempt too much
15 Like Pound's "paired butterflies"
16 "King - " Kent comic strip
17 One of the Redgraves
23 Loan shark's practice
24 Operating
25 Loup -- (werewolf)
29 Groan's partner
32 --con carne
33 Biting
34 Italian cathedral
35 Thomas Tusser's prediction
36 Devoured completely
37 Beavers' structures
38 Hit the books
39 Japan's prime minister: 1978-80
40 Paté de --
42 Musical transition
43 Make points
46 Senorita's chaperon
49 Jumped
51 An Alda
52 Gogol's "-- Bulba"

53 Happening
54 Networks
55 -- land: buffer area
58 B'nai --
61 Ceremonial staff
63 Lacking finish
64 Take for --
65 Limit of a sort
66 "-- Kick Out of You"
67 Test alternative
68 French income
69 "Pomp and Circumstance" composer
70 Wet blanket
72 Moslem group of scholars
73 Grimace
76 Newcomer in town
79 Good luck
82 Bad actors
83 "-- with vain desire --" Tennyson
84 " -- Wehr": Siegfried's oath
85 Arsenic's theatrical companion
86 Attacks with vigor
88 Clockwork fruit
90 28th U.S. president
92 Dancing Gaynor
93 Achille -- hijacked ship
94 Wander about
95 Turgenev's birthplace
98 Honshu seaport
99 August in Aries
101 Hooter
102 Word of reproach
103 Diminutive suffix
104 Actress Rita
[/crossword puzzle]]

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