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Hiroshima:  
The Personal and Political Factors that Led to President Truman's Decision

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## **Hiroshima: The Personal and Political Factors that Led to President Truman's Decision**

### **I**

The decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima was one of the major events in world history. Since then, many people have questioned President Truman's decision and wondered whether Japan would have surrendered soon anyway. President Truman did not make his decision in a vacuum, but was influenced by many factors, both personal and political. Many historians have just looked at the political reasons that Truman dropped the atomic bomb, while ignoring the very real personal factors that may have also contributed to his decision. Truman's childhood, his relationship with his father, his early experiences with failure, his experiences in World War I, his dealings with the Pendegast political machine, and his feelings of inadequacy and inferiority all influenced his thinking and motivation. Any study that attempts to answer the question of why the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima must first examine the man who made the decision.

The political factors that led to Truman's decision to drop the bomb have been thoroughly examined. Truman always asserted that the primary reason for dropping the bomb was to save lives; that an invasion of Japan would have cost many more lives, both American and Japanese. This explanation has come up for a lot of debate in recent years. There is also a lot of evidence that the bomb was dropped, in part, to impress and intimidate the Soviet Union, which led to the beginnings of the Cold War. Historians

have also suggested lesser factors, such as revenge for Pearl Harbor, racial discrimination toward the Japanese, and a feeling that the bomb had to be used after so much time and money was spent developing it in the Manhattan Project.<sup>1</sup> While the political factors have been the subject of countless studies and controversies, the personal factors of Truman's own life have been largely neglected. Obviously, the political factors were Truman's primary considerations for dropping the bomb, but his personal experiences influenced how he thought about the situation and the options available to him.

Many books and articles have been written on the subject of political psychology and many have evaluated President Truman. James Barber argues that a president's personality is one of the greatest influences on his decisions, that; "every story of Presidential decision making is really two stories: an outer one in which a rational man calculates and an inner one in which an emotional man feels."<sup>2</sup> Barber's take on Truman is that the President had a definite lack of self-confidence that stemmed from his early childhood and he tried to make up for it by appearing quick and decisive on important issues, which would make him appear to be a stronger leader. As he says, Truman often made quick decisions without considering all of the options available to him because he

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<sup>1</sup> For a concise historiography of the factors that led to the decision to drop the atomic bomb see: Gar Alperovitz, The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Paul Baker, ed., The Atomic Bomb: The Great Decision (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968); Barton J. Bernstein, ed., The Atomic Bomb: The Critical Issues (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976); Alexander Burnham, "Okinawa, Harry Truman, and the Atomic Bomb," Virginia Quarterly Review 71 (1995); Robert Griffith, ed., Major Problems in American History Since 1945 (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992); Alonzo L. Hamby, "Truman and the Bomb," History Today 45, no. 8 (1995); Robert James Maddox, Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Ronald Takaki, Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995); Dennis D. Wainstock, The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996); J. Samuel Walker, "History, Collective Memory, and the Decision to Use the Bomb," Diplomatic History 19 (1995).

<sup>2</sup> James David Barber, The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), 7.

wanted to appear to be in control.<sup>3</sup> Another important work on political psychology is by Alexander and Juliette George. Their thesis on Truman is very similar to Barber's: "Truman...accepted the responsibility of making difficult decisions...for it enabled him to satisfy himself- and, he hoped, others- that he had the personal qualities needed in the presidency."<sup>4</sup> Several other authors have written important works on political psychology, which include descriptions of Truman's personality and how they influenced his decision making.<sup>5</sup>

President Truman often asserted that his childhood was ideal, growing up on a farm in Missouri with a loving, extended family. However, Truman's family was not very stable or successful in his early years and they had to move around a lot while his father struggled at different jobs. Truman's relationship with his father was strained and he usually worked with his mother in the kitchen, instead of out on the farm with his father. Truman was a good student and enjoyed school, but often thought of himself as a "sissy" because he was not good at sports and ran away from fights.<sup>6</sup> As Truman progressed into adulthood he faced many disappointments, including not being able to go to college because his father lost all of his money on a investing in grain futures. Truman was later forced to quit his job as a bank clerk in Kansas City when his father needed his help on the family farm. Truman left the farm for World War I where his experiences

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 262.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George, Presidential Personality and Performance (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 206.

<sup>5</sup> Fred I. Greenstein, The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Clinton (New York: Martin Kessler Books/Free Press, 2000); Alonzo L. Hamby, "An American Democrat: A Reevaluation of the Personality of Harry S. Truman," Political Science Quarterly 106 (1991); Neil J. Kressel, ed., Political Psychology: Classic and Contemporary Readings (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1993); Robert Shogun, The Double-Edged Sword: How Character Makes and Ruins Presidents from Washington to Clinton (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Harry S. Truman, Memoirs: Volume One, Year of Decisions (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955), 116.

greatly influenced how he felt about war. After he came home he married his fiancé Bess Wallace and helped start a haberdashery business, which later failed. Truman was running out of career options, so he decided to enter politics with the help of the powerful Pendergast political machine, which would negatively affect his future political career. Truman was a successful senator, but was derided when chosen as President Roosevelt's Vice President in 1944 because most people felt that he was not up to the job of being President. All of these experiences strengthened Truman's inferiority complex and left him feeling inadequate for the job of being President.

Truman's feelings of inadequacy helped determine how he acted as President. He always projected an image of self-confidence and assurance, but that was often a mask for his feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence. As Vice President, Truman was not informed of the Manhattan Project or the development of the atomic bomb and he came into the office completely inexperienced in foreign relations. He also felt enormous pressure to end the war successfully and to live up to the standard set by President Franklin Roosevelt, who had enjoyed tremendous popularity. All of these factors left Truman feeling isolated and unprepared for the job. Under these conditions, he was greatly susceptible to the influence of his top advisors and cabinet members who had much more experience. Their influence was never more apparent, or important, than in Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

## II

Harry S. Truman was born on May 8, 1884 in Lamar, Missouri to John and Martha Truman. His father, John Anderson Truman, was a farmer who was always

trying to strike it rich, but with very little success. His mother, Martha Ellen Young Truman, was a well-liked daughter of a prominent western Missouri family who had married John Truman at the age of twenty-nine, after her family had given up on her ever getting married. After they were wed they moved right outside of Lamar, Missouri where John bought and sold mules. Shortly after Harry's birth, however, the small family moved twice more before finally settling down on the farm of Martha's parents near Blue Ridge, Missouri.<sup>7</sup>

Truman always remembered his childhood fondly. He lived on the family farm until the 1890 when, at the age of six, his immediate family moved to Independence so that Harry could go to school. Truman loved school and was a good student, though not exceptional, but felt left out from the other children because of his glasses and the fact that he was not very good at sports. He also found it very hard to relate to girls of his own age, which is slightly ironic considering his close relationships with his mother, sister, and other female relatives. Though Truman thought the other boys his age thought of him as a "sissy," most of them just considered him serious and intelligent.<sup>8</sup> Remembering being called a sissy, Truman later said, "That's hard on a boy...and it gives him an inferiority complex, and he has a hard time overcoming it."<sup>9</sup> Even from an early age, it appears, Truman suffered from low self-esteem and apparently believed that others did not like him.

Truman's relationship with his father was somewhat difficult. He was frequently sick as a child and his mother felt an urge to protect him, so he usually helped her with

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<sup>7</sup> David McCullough, Truman (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Merle Miller, Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1974), 33.

the household chores while his younger brother, John Vivian, helped with his father's tasks. Consequently, Truman did not develop a close relationship with his father until later in life and felt that he was somewhat of a disappointment. However, his father always appears to have had genuine respect for Harry, which he, in turn, shared.<sup>10</sup> John Truman was a financial failure, which did affect Harry. The elder Truman was always trying to get rich quick on risky business ventures and usually ended up losing a lot of money. During Harry's senior year of high school in 1902, his father put all of his assets into grain futures and managed to lose everything. Because of this, Truman was unable to go to college. However, he appears to have felt no bitterness toward his father and even seems to have felt that he had to compensate for his father's failings. "A half-century later, when Alfred Steinberg suggested to him that his father had been a failure, Truman responded snappishly, "My father was not a failure. After all, he was the father of a President of the United States."<sup>11</sup>

Truman worked as a bank clerk in Kansas City right after graduating from high school, before going home to work on the farm for eight years to help his father. After his father died in 1911, he continued to work the farm and experienced his first big financial failure when a zinc mine he invested in proved to be a bust. Shortly afterward, Truman invested in an oil and gas exploration partnership, which also turned out to be a failure.<sup>12</sup> By 1914, Truman was deeply in debt and was probably feeling quite pessimistic about his future. The one bright point in his life at the time was that Bess

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>11</sup> Alonzo L. Hamby, "American Democrat," 47.

<sup>12</sup> McCullough, Truman, 101.



Wallace had finally agreed to marry him after her initial rejection.<sup>13</sup> She was the only woman with whom he ever had a serious romantic relationship.

Truman decided to volunteer to go to World War I almost immediately after the United States entered it in 1917. He was thirty-three and could easily have avoided going to war because of his age and poor eyesight, but apparently felt that it was something he had to do. His service in the war was a turning point in his life. Truman later said, "My whole political career is based on my war service and war associates."<sup>14</sup> He became a captain who served with distinction and gained the honor and respect of those under his command. "Terrible as it had been, it was also "the most terrific experience of my life," Truman recounted.<sup>15</sup> It was his first experience with leadership and at first he struggled to be commanding, but by the end of the war he was clearly in charge of his men. He came home from the war with an apparent new sense of self-confidence and a restored optimism. However, he had also seen the terrors of war firsthand, which would haunt him for the rest of his life and make him reluctant to send anyone else in to fight.<sup>16</sup>

After his return to Missouri in 1919, Truman married Bess and started a retail clothing business in Kansas City with his partner, Eddie Jacobson. The business was initially a success, but went bankrupt after three years when Kansas City hit a major depression. The business was in debt to a total of \$35,000 and Truman would be paying it off for the next fifteen years.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Truman was busy investing in some risky real estate deals and eventually wound up losing the family farm in 1922. Truman

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<sup>13</sup> Takaki, Hiroshima, 102.

<sup>14</sup> Barber, Presidential Character, 258.

<sup>15</sup> Robert H. Ferrell, ed., Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman, 1910-1959 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 274.

<sup>16</sup> Burnham, "Okinawa, Harry Truman, and Atomic Bomb," 7.

<sup>17</sup> Roy Jenkins, Truman (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 18.

was thirty-eight years old, was seriously in debt, had failed at every career he had tried, and was living with his wife and young daughter at his mother-in-law's house. It is easy to see why he considered himself a failure and felt that his life was going nowhere. It was with this sense of desperation that he entered into politics.<sup>18</sup>

### III

The Pendergast political machine ruled Kansas City politics in the 1920's and Tom Pendergast was the Big Boss. Tom's brother Mike contacted Truman in the latter part of 1921 and asked him if he would like to run for eastern judge of Jackson County, a job that would put him in the courthouse in Independence. "Harry accepted their offer at once, with no hesitation."<sup>19</sup> Thus started Truman's political career and his association with the Pendergast machine, which would last until 1939. This partnership would hurt Truman's career as he advanced in the political world and would reinforce his own negative self-image.

Truman won the election in 1922, but lost his seat in a Republican landslide in 1924.<sup>20</sup> The Pendergast machine contacted Truman again and he ran for presiding judge of Jackson County in 1926. He held the position for eight years until 1935. During his tenure as judge, Truman made improving county roads his main priority, at which he was very successful.<sup>21</sup> However, it was also at this time that Truman had his first confrontation with the Big Boss, Tom Pendergast, over awarding contracts to build the new roads. Pendergast assumed that Truman would award the contracts to party

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<sup>18</sup> Hamby, "American Democrat," 48.

<sup>19</sup> McCullough, Truman, 159.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Daniels, The Man of Independence (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1950), 151.

loyalists, but Truman refused and said he would give the contracts to the lowest bidders. At first, Pendergast was furious and told Truman to do as he was told. Truman persisted in his refusal, however, and “Pendergast acquiesced reluctantly, but scornfully told Truman that his honor didn’t amount to a pinch of snuff.”<sup>22</sup>

After that meeting, Pendergast never asked Truman to do anything dishonest again, but reminded him that he was still in charge.<sup>23</sup> Truman came away from this experience knowing that he was involved in a criminal enterprise, but helpless to do anything about it. He knew that if he crossed the Pendergasts he would be out of politics forever. Truman tried to console himself with the fact that he was still honest himself, but the situation had deeply bothered him and apparently left him feeling that he was not in control of his own life.<sup>24</sup>

Another troubling experience for Truman at the time was a dealing he had with the Eastern judge of Jackson County, Robert Barr, who Truman had handpicked for the job. Barr had stolen \$10,000 and Truman found out about it. Truman, however, needed Barr’s support for the bonds for the road measures to pass. Consequently, he let Barr get away with the theft. “I had to compromise to get the voted road system carried out,” Truman wrote in his diary.<sup>25</sup> He felt horrible about the situation and agonized over whether he had made the right decision. Truman wrote, “Am I an administrator or not? Or am I just a crook to compromise in order to get the job done?”<sup>26</sup> By now, Truman was completely disgusted with the Pendergast machine and began looking for a way out. He

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<sup>22</sup> Hamby, “American Democrat,” 47.

<sup>23</sup> McCullough, Truman, 188.

<sup>24</sup> Hamby, “American Democrat,” 47.

<sup>25</sup> Robert H. Ferrell, ed., Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980), 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

felt the experience had tarnished him and his self-esteem hit an all time low. Politics had changed him and he longed for a return to the ideals of his youth.

#### IV

In 1932, Truman had hoped to be the Democratic nominee for Governor of Missouri, but the Pendergast machine overlooked him. In 1933, however, he was picked by Tom Pendergast to be the director of the Federal Reemployment Service in Missouri, which meant he traveled to Washington, D.C. on a regular basis. It was at this time that Truman decided to run for the United States Senate. Truman had the support of Tom Pendergast, but he had not been his first choice. Pendergast had asked three other candidates to run first, but was turned down by all three. When someone suggested in a meeting that Harry Truman should run for the Senate, Pendergast exclaimed, "Do you mean to tell me that you actually believe that Truman can be elected to the United States Senate?"<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, being all out of options, Pendergast agreed. Truman announced his candidacy on May 14, 1934.

Truman was an energetic and tireless campaigner and he drove throughout the state speaking to anyone who would listen. The primary was the real contest in Democratic-dominated Missouri, and Truman won by 40,000 votes, an overwhelming victory.<sup>28</sup> Truman easily won the general election in the fall. The victory did not boost Truman's self-confidence. He assumed, along with most everyone else, that the Pendergast machine had won the election, with him contributing very little. Thus far in his life, politics had only strengthened Truman's inferiority complex because he felt that

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<sup>27</sup> McCullough, Truman, 204.

<sup>28</sup> Daniels, Man of Independence, 172.

he could not win an election on his own. His dealings with the Pendergast machine also apparently left him feeling corrupted and he lost his belief in his own self-virtue.

“...politics had predominantly negative effects upon his [Truman’s] emotions, personality, and physical well-being.”<sup>29</sup>

Truman was a hard-working and diligent senator from the beginning of his term. He felt that he had to prove he belonged there and he set out to be involved in as much as possible. On one of his first days in the Senate, Senator J. Hamilton Lewis of Illinois said to him, “Harry, don’t start out with an inferiority complex. For the first six months you’ll wonder how the hell you got here, and after that you’ll wonder how the hell the rest of us got here.”<sup>30</sup> Despite this advice, Truman definitely had an inferiority complex and felt that he did not fit in with the other more experienced senators. He also thought that the other senators looked down on him because of his involvement with the Pendergast machine. “I was under a cloud,” he would say later.<sup>31</sup> While most of his fellow senators were generally supportive, there were those who could not get past Truman’s association with the Pendergasts and this hurt his political career. Truman had been caught in a Catch-22. Without his connection to the Pendergasts, he could not have become involved in politics in the first place because he did not come from an important family nor did he have any money. Now, however, this connection was actually hindering his political advancement because other politicians associated him with a corrupt political machine. Truman apparently felt very bitter about this situation, but also ignored his own culpability in it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hamby, “American Democrat,” 47.

<sup>30</sup> Truman, Memoirs, 144.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Jenkins, Truman, 38.

In 1939, the Federal Bureau of Investigation arrested Tom Pendergast for tax evasion and began investigating charges of voter fraud in Kansas City. Pendergast was convicted and sentenced to fifteen months in prison. Truman was greatly concerned during this time that he would be charged with voter fraud, but in the end he was not.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the cloud of the Pendergast machine was lifted from him and Truman ran for the Senate again and won in 1940 in his closest election yet. Truman was relieved to have won the election on his own and his ego and self-confidence received a much-needed boost.<sup>34</sup>

While the press and his fellow senators appeared to respect Truman by writing favorable articles on him and appointing him to important committees, President Roosevelt showed very little interest in him. Roosevelt did not offer Truman any public support during his second senatorial campaign, which greatly annoyed Truman. In addition, Senator Truman had failed to receive any meaningful meetings with the President and he felt that he was being ignored.<sup>35</sup>

## V

In the summer of 1943, Truman began to be mentioned by political insiders as a possible vice-presidential candidate in 1944. However, Roosevelt said nothing about it and Truman, true to his nature, did not believe he would be considered because he did not believe he was respected enough to be chosen.<sup>36</sup> Senator Truman did not want to become Vice President. He knew the President was ill and he felt that he was not up to the task of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Daniels, Man of Independence, 213.

<sup>35</sup> McCullough, Truman, 241..

<sup>36</sup> Truman, Memoirs, 193.

being President. When he heard that Roosevelt was considering asking him he replied, “Tell him to go to hell.”<sup>37</sup> Truman loved his job as senator from Missouri and he feared the awesome responsibility of being President. Finally, Roosevelt asked Truman to be his vice presidential candidate at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Truman felt that he had no choice but to accept because of the ongoing war. “Well,” I said finally, “if that is the situation, I’ll have to say yes, but why the hell didn’t he tell me in the first place?”<sup>38</sup>

Immediately the press began to ridicule Truman. Raymond P. Brandt, a reporter for the New York Times, wrote, “If anything should happen to President Roosevelt...we shall have as our leader a political hack when we could have had a great man.”<sup>39</sup> The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette said in 1944 that Truman was one of the weakest candidates ever nominated.<sup>40</sup> Truman was just as unsure of himself as everyone else and his feelings of inadequacy and inferiority roared up again.<sup>41</sup> Roosevelt won re-election by a narrow margin and Truman became Vice President for eighty-two days. During this time, the President and Vice President had very little contact and Truman learned nothing about the Manhattan Project, the atomic bomb, or Roosevelt’s meetings with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill or Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. Truman even remarked that he knew nothing about foreign affairs.<sup>42</sup> On April 12, 1945 President Roosevelt died and Harry Truman became President.

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<sup>37</sup> Barber, Presidential Character, 248.

<sup>38</sup> Truman, Memoirs, 193.

<sup>39</sup> Raymond P. Brandt, “Roosevelt’s Folly,” The New York Times, 22 October 1944, sec. A.

<sup>40</sup> Steven Gould, “Truman as Vice-President,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 23 July 1944, sec. A.

<sup>41</sup> Takaki, Hiroshima, 104.

<sup>42</sup> Robert H. Ferrell, Truman: A Life (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 198.

The nation mourned Roosevelt and doubted Truman's capacity to lead. In a meeting with generals Eisenhower and Bradley in Germany in 1945, General Patton remarked, "...people are made Vice President who are never intended...to be presidents."<sup>43</sup> Time magazine wrote, "[Truman] is a man of distinct limitations, especially in experience of high-level politics."<sup>44</sup> Truman was well aware of people's low expectations of him and he felt the same way. Truman said to Senator George Aiken of Vermont, "I'm not big enough. I'm not big enough for this job."<sup>45</sup> Suddenly, all of the early failures in his life and people's consistently low expectations of him had caught up to Truman and he was deeply afraid.<sup>46</sup> The situation got worse when, on April 25, 1945, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson first informed President Truman of the development of the atomic bomb.<sup>47</sup>

## VI

Germany was the first country to achieve atomic fission in 1938. President Roosevelt, along with his top advisers, believed that they were continuing their experiments and that the United States must attempt to catch up. Thus, in 1939, the Manhattan Project was born. Roosevelt feared what would happen if Germany developed the atomic bomb first, and the original target proposed for the bomb was Germany. However, when Germany surrendered on May 7, 1945, the Manhattan Project continued and was even intensified. The United States government did not expect Japan

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<sup>43</sup> McCullough, Truman, 350.

<sup>44</sup> Richard McArthur, "How Will Truman Lead?," Time, 13 April 1945, 22-25.

<sup>45</sup> Robert J. Donovan, Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1945-1948 (New York: Norton, 1977), 15.

<sup>46</sup> McCullough, Truman, 320.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," in Paul Baker, ed., Atomic Bomb, 8.



to develop any atomic weapons, but Roosevelt expected the bomb would end the war more quickly.<sup>48</sup> Secretary of War Stimson had first learned of the possibility of an atomic bomb in the fall of 1941, when President Roosevelt appointed him to a committee to advise the President on issues of nuclear power. Stimson was informed of all major developments of the Manhattan Project throughout Roosevelt's presidency. President Roosevelt never issued a direct statement saying that he would drop the bomb on Japan, but Secretary Stimson wrote after the war, "At no time, from 1941 to 1945, did I ever hear it suggested by the President, or by any other responsible member of the government, that atomic energy should not be used in the war."<sup>49</sup>

It was only Truman's twelfth day as President when Secretary Stimson informed him of the development of the atomic bomb. Stimson went to the President alone, so as not to arouse media curiosity. He handed Truman a memorandum of which the first sentence read, "Within four months 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."<sup>50</sup> Stimson intended to shock the President and he did. The memo explained that the United States and Great Britain were the only countries to have developed the bomb, but that other countries would surely develop it in the not too distant future. It ended with a recommendation to the President to form a committee on the matter.<sup>51</sup>

President Truman formed the Interim Committee, which was intended to advise the President on the use of the atomic bomb. The members of the highly secretive committee were: Henry Stimson, who was Chairman; George L. Harrison, President of

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<sup>48</sup> Takaki, *Hiroshima*, 19.

<sup>49</sup> Stimson, "Decision to Use Atomic Bomb", 10.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

the New York Life Insurance Company who served as special assistant to Stimson; James F. Byrnes, as Truman's personal representative; Ralph A. Bard, Under Secretary of the Navy; William L. Clayton, Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs; Dr. Vannevar Bush, president of the Carnegie Institute of Washington and Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development; Dr. Karl T. Compton, president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Chief of Field Service in the Office of Scientific Research and Development; and Dr. James B. Conant, president of Harvard University and chairman of the National Defense Research Committee. The committee held four meetings, the last of which was a two-day session held on May 31<sup>st</sup> and June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945, in which the committee was joined by an advisory panel of four physicists who had been very involved in the development of the atomic bomb. The physicists were: Enrico Fermi and Arthur H. Compton of the University of Chicago; Ernest O. Lawrence of the Radiation Laboratory at the University of California at Berkeley; and J. Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Los Alamos Laboratory in New Mexico, where the atomic bomb was being completed.<sup>52</sup>

On June 1, 1945 the Interim Committee, along with the group of physicists, reached a conclusion on which all members agreed. The atomic bomb should be dropped on Japan as soon as possible with no warning, and the best target would be an important war plant surrounded by worker's homes to "make a profound psychological impression on as many of the inhabitants as possible." Secretary Byrnes delivered the

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<sup>52</sup> "General Leslie Groves Reports on a Successful Test, July 1945," in Robert Griffith, ed., The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb on Japan. Major Problems in American History Since 1945 (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 54.

recommendation to President Truman, who agreed with the report: "I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used."<sup>53</sup>

Another group of scientists, headed by Leo Szilard, urged the President not to use the bomb, but was overruled by the government's own science advisers, the physicists who had assisted the Interim Committee. Generals George C. Marshall and Leslie R. Groves, commanding general of the Manhattan Project, were Truman's top military advisers and they also recommended using the bomb as quickly as possible.<sup>54</sup>

## VII

James F. Byrnes was one of the most influential members of the Interim Committee. He had been a powerful member of Congress from South Carolina during the 1930's, was appointed to direct the Office of War Mobilization by President Roosevelt in 1941, and was considered for the vice presidency in 1944, but Roosevelt passed him over because his advisers thought he was too outspoken. Truman had great respect for his opinion. Byrnes was the most vocal advocate for surprising the Japanese with the atomic bomb. He also was totally opposed to accepting anything other than unconditional surrender from the Japanese. Byrnes thought that if the Japanese were warned where the atomic bomb would be dropped, that they might transport American prisoners of war to the area. He also feared that a demonstration of the bomb would fail and give more impetus to the Japanese cause.<sup>55</sup>

However, Byrnes also seems to have been greatly concerned with the expansionist Soviet Union. Byrnes advised Truman that the bomb "might well put us in a position to

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<sup>53</sup> "President Harry S. Truman's Advisers Discuss the Atomic Bomb, May 1945" *ibid.*, 51.

<sup>54</sup> Takaki, *Hiroshima*, 39.

<sup>55</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, 395.

dictate our own terms at the end of the war.”<sup>56</sup> Byrnes had the ear of President Truman, being one of his most trusted advisers, and he intended to make sure that the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan.

General Leslie Groves was also an important influence on President Truman. He headed the Manhattan Project from the very beginning and had always assumed that the bomb would be used. Groves did not believe that Truman actually had much of a choice in deciding to drop the bomb. “...as far as I was concerned, his decision was basically one of noninterference...It would indeed have taken a lot of nerve to say no at that time.”<sup>57</sup> Groves also thought that the atomic bomb would give the United States an important advantage over the Soviet Union in the future.<sup>58</sup> At this point, all of Truman’s primary advisers were in favor of dropping the atomic bomb on Japan.

President Truman traveled to the Potsdam Conference on July 15 and remained there until August 2. During his time at Potsdam, Truman was able to escape much of the politics of Washington, D.C. and make his final decision on the use of the atomic bomb. Meanwhile, back in New Mexico, the first successful test of the atomic bomb was conducted on July 16, 1945. General Groves wrote a glowing report of the test which said, “The test was successful beyond the most optimistic expectations of anyone.”<sup>59</sup> President Truman was very much uplifted by this news and his confidence level was greatly increased in his subsequent dealings with Stalin. He apparently felt that he did

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<sup>56</sup> Truman, *Memoirs*, 87.

<sup>57</sup> Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 173.

<sup>58</sup> Takiki, *Hiroshima*, 39.

<sup>59</sup> Groves, “General Leslie Groves Reports on a Successful Test,” 54.

not need the participation of the Soviet Union in the war; the war could be won with the atomic bomb.<sup>60</sup>

On July 25, 1945, President Truman officially approved the use of the atomic bomb on Japan sometime during the first ten days of August.<sup>61</sup> Hiroshima, Kokura, or Nigata were the three cities that would be targeted, in that order. President Truman ordered the bomb to be dropped unless Japan surrendered unconditionally before that time. On July 26, the United States, Great Britain, and China issued the Potsdam Declaration calling for Japan's unconditional surrender or "the inevitable and complete destruction of the Japanese armed forces" would ensue. No mention of the atomic bomb was made. On July 28, Japan appeared to reject the peace offer and, on August 6, 1945, at 8:11 AM, the Enola Gay dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.<sup>62</sup>

## VII

Why did Truman decide to use the bomb? The most widely accepted answer was given by Truman himself, who said, "General Marshall told me that it might cost half a million American lives to force the enemy's surrender on his home grounds."<sup>63</sup> President Truman always maintained that he dropped the bomb to save as many lives as possible. He apparently believed that that was why he ordered the use of the bomb, but his decision must be looked at in the context of the rest of his presidency and even in the rest of his life. Truman assumed the office after the death of an extremely popular President and he was thrown into the presidency without any real preparation or knowledge of foreign

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<sup>60</sup> Robert H. Ferrell, ed., Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 54.

<sup>61</sup> Alonzo Hamby, "Truman and Bomb," 22.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Truman, Memoirs, 417.

affairs. Most of the country, including Truman himself, had exceedingly low expectations of him. Truman's decision to drop the bomb, therefore, was also influenced by an inferiority complex he had suffered from from the earliest stages of his childhood, which was reinforced by his personal and political experiences.

Harry Truman had always faced low expectations of himself, had suffered through many disappointments and failures during his lifetime, and often felt that he was not masculine enough. Once he even wrote to his future wife Bess, "Mamma says I was intended for a girl anyway. It makes me pretty mad to be told so but I guess it's partly so."<sup>64</sup> Truman suffered through the teasing of his classmates and felt that he was a disappointment to his father because he was not enough of a man. Truman finally got a chance to prove his masculinity when he led a cavalry unit in World War I and his men remembered his bravery. However, Truman still felt like he had not accomplished anything in life, especially after his numerous investments left him heavily in debt and his haberdashery business failed.<sup>65</sup>

Truman entered into politics only because he had failed at everything else and his involvement with the Pendergast political machine only reinforced his inferiority complex. Truman initially felt that he could not succeed in politics by himself, but his narrow re-election to a second term in the Senate without the Pendergast machine helped him overcome that fear. However, whenever Truman conquered a major hurdle in his life, some new obstacle always seemed to present itself. After his reelection to the Senate, Truman was the most confident he had even been in his life, even sometimes appearing arrogant. "Instead of his original humble attitude," wrote...Raymond P.

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<sup>64</sup> Ferrell, Dear Bess, 80.

<sup>65</sup> Takaki, Hiroshima, 103.

Brandt in the New York Times in 1940, “he is almost arrogant at times...”<sup>66</sup> However, as soon as word began to spread that Truman might be Vice President, and when he was subsequently nominated, he began to fall again into self-doubt. It did not help his already low self-esteem that he was widely portrayed in the press as inadequate for the presidency. Right when Truman was beginning to feel comfortable as Vice President, President Roosevelt died and Truman had to take over the most powerful office in the world. Just when Truman was becoming accustomed to the presidency, he was informed of the existence of the atomic bomb and was faced with one of the most difficult decisions in history. Already suffering from self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, he was expected to make a decision that would alter the course of history, in a very short amount of time. It is almost amazing that Truman handled the situation as well as he did.

The decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima was probably not made as President Truman described it in his Memoirs: “The final decision of where and when to use the atomic bomb was up to me. Let there be no mistake about it.”<sup>67</sup> It is true that President Truman had the final say and could, theoretically, have chosen not to use the bomb, but in reality, Truman let his top advisers make the decision for him. Truman was not prepared at the critical time to make a fully informed, independent decision. He did not have enough knowledge of, or experience in, foreign affairs, nor did he possess the self-confidence to go against the advice of his top military, political, and scientific advisers. Truman probably would have dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima even if he had been a more experienced president, but he might have given the situation a little

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<sup>66</sup> Hamby, “American Democrat,” 48.

<sup>67</sup> Truman, Memoirs, 419.

more thought. As it was, he wholeheartedly followed the advice of his top advisors without thinking about the matter independently and objectively.

James F. Byrnes, Henry L. Stimson, and General Leslie Groves were all very influential in the decision to use the atomic bomb. Truman relied greatly on their advice because of their long years of experience. Byrnes held particular sway over the President. Byrnes served as Truman's personal representative on the Interim Committee and he was the one who informed Truman of all of their decisions and recommendations. Byrnes was also the most hard-line member of the Committee and the most ardent proponent of using the bomb without any warning. Byrnes had a strong personality and probably had a fairly easy time in persuading the President to go in the direction he wanted. If Truman had possessed more self-confidence, he could have taken Byrnes' advice with a grain of salt. Stimson was also influential as Secretary of War and one of Truman's most trusted advisers because of his long years of experience in foreign affairs, while Truman also considered Groves an expert because he was head of the Manhattan Project. These three advisers were the primary decision makers in Truman's early days as President and probably had a greater role in the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima than the President himself.

Harry Truman's experiences in life did not leave him with enough self-confidence to be the tough, decisive President he appeared to be. He was very successful at hiding his insecurities, but they were still there nonetheless. There were many positive experiences in Truman's life, but they could not outweigh the heavy burden of the negative ones. Because of these experiences, the President was left with an inferiority complex that did not allow him to believe that he was up to the task at hand, whether



being an adequate husband for Bess Wallace or being a successful President of the United States. Truman desperately wanted, however, to be seen as confident and capable, and when he became President he wanted the whole world to see that he was a strong leader and that he would not let anyone push him around anymore. Early in his political career, he had allowed the Pendergasts to do so. He wanted to show his childhood classmates, his father, his wife, his political acquaintances, the press, and, most importantly, himself that he was more than capable of being just a President. However, he still did not possess enough self-confidence to make the decision to drop the atomic bomb, so he let his advisers make it for him, while telling the world that the decision was his alone. Finally, Truman felt that he had made a major contribution to the world and that he was not a failure anymore. In reality, however, he had let others make the most difficult decision of his life for him and he was still consumed with his own insecurities. For the rest of his life Truman would refuse to question his decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan, probably in part because he was not sure if he had been capable of making another decision.

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