



Fat Man plutonium bomb being readied at Tinian Island.

Source: Los Alamos National Laboratory

The untested uranium bomb, called Little Boy by the Los Alamos scientists, was air dropped on Hiroshima on August 6. The plutonium weapon, known as Fat Man in honor of Winston Churchill, followed three days later at Nagasaki. Within a week, the Japanese surrendered. Little Boy killed 70,000 people outright. By the end of 1945, radiation-sickness deaths pushed the total to 140,000. Five years later the total reached 200,000. Fat Man killed 40,000 people outright, with the total eventually reaching 140,000.¹⁹

THE POSTWAR ATOM AND THE ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION

Planning for the postwar atom began before the war was over. In July 1944, Met Lab scientists issued a "Prospectus on Nucleonics" calling for atomic research and advocating an international organization to prevent nuclear conflict. In May 1945, President Harry S. Truman, in office less than a month following Roosevelt's death, approved the formation of an Interim Committee, chaired by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson and with Bush and other top officials as members. Charged with recommending wartime use of atomic weapons and developing postwar atomic policy, the Interim Committee discussed these issues with its scientific panel, which included Oppenheimer, and leading industrialists involved with the Manhattan Project. On June 6, Stimson advised Truman that the Interim Committee was

considering domestic legislation. Stimson also noted that the committee generally held that international agreements should be negotiated, making public all nuclear research and establishing an international system of inspections. Barring international agreements, the United States should continue to produce as much fissionable material as possible.

The following month the Interim Committee drafted legislation for a peacetime organization with responsibilities similar to the Manhattan Project. With a strong predilection toward the Federal Government's continued dominance in nuclear research and development, the draft legislation called for a nine-member board of commissioners including a strong military presence. Truman advocated speedy passage of the legislation, which became known as the May-Johnson bill in its congressional version. Groves, Bush, and Oppenheimer (with some misgivings) found the bill acceptable, but many scientists complained that the legislation maintained military control over nuclear research. This may have been tolerable during the war, they observed, but was unacceptable during peacetime when free scientific interchange should be resumed.

When support for the May-Johnson bill eroded in late 1945, Senator Brien McMahon (D-CT) introduced substitute legislation. Groves opposed the new McMahon bill, citing its weak security provisions and reduced military presence. Following often bitter debate over civilian versus military control, Congress passed the McMahon bill and Truman signed it into law on August 1, 1946. The McMahon Act, known officially as the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, transferred authority from the United States Army to the United States Atomic Energy Commission. Composed of a five-member civilian board serving full-time, the new Commission was assisted by a general advisory committee and a military liaison committee. As inheritors of the Manhattan Engineer District's far-flung scientific and industrial complex, the Atomic Energy Commission continued the government monopoly in the field of atomic research and development.²⁰