
Part V: The Atomic Bomb and American Strategy

With the Manhattan Project on the brink of success in spring 1945, the atomic bomb became an increasingly important element in American strategy. A long hoped-for weapon now seemed within reach at a time when hard decisions were being made, not only on ending the war in the Pacific, but also on the shape of the postwar international order.

From Roosevelt to Truman

On April 12, only weeks before Germany's unconditional surrender on May 7, President Roosevelt died suddenly in Warm Springs, Georgia, bringing Vice President Harry S. Truman, a veteran of the United States Senate, to the presidency. Truman was not privy to many of the secret war efforts Roosevelt had undertaken and had to be briefed extensively in his first weeks in office. One of these briefings, provided by Secretary of War Stimson on April 25, concerned S-1 (the Manhattan Project). Stimson, with Groves present during part of the meeting, traced the history of the Manhattan Project, summarized its status, and detailed the timetable for testing and combat delivery. Truman asked numerous questions during the forty-five-

minute meeting and made it clear that he understood the relevance of the atomic bomb to upcoming diplomatic and military initiatives.

By the time Truman took office, Japan was near defeat. American aircraft were attacking Japanese cities at will. A single firebomb raid in March killed nearly 100,000 people and injured over a million in Tokyo. A second air attack on Tokyo in May killed 83,000. Meanwhile, the United States Navy had cut the islands' supply lines. But because of the generally accepted view that the Japanese would fight to the bitter end, a costly invasion of the home islands seemed likely, though some American policy makers held that successful combat delivery of one or more atomic bombs might convince the Japanese that further resistance was futile.

The Interim Committee Report

On June 6 Stimson again briefed Truman on S-1. The briefing summarized the consensus of an Interim Committee meeting held on May 31. The Interim Committee was an advisory group on atomic research composed of Bush, Conant, Compton, Under Secretary of the Navy Ralph A. Bard, Assistant Secretary of State William L. Clayton, and future Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. Oppenheimer, Fermi, Compton, and Lawrence served as scientific advisors (the Scientific Panel), while Marshall represented the military. A second meeting on June 1 with Walter S. Carpenter of DuPont, James C. White of Tennessee Eastman, George H. Bucher of Westinghouse, and James A. Rafferty of Union Carbide provided input from the business side. The Interim Committee was charged with recommending the proper use of atomic weapons in wartime and developing a position for the United States on postwar atomic policy. The May 31 meeting concluded that the United States should try to retain superiority of nuclear weapons in case international relations deteriorated.⁴⁵ Most present at the meeting thought that the United States should protect its monopoly for the present, though they conceded that the secrets could not be held long. It was only a matter of time before another country, presumably Russia, would be capable of producing atomic weapons.

There was some discussion of free exchange of nuclear research for peaceful purposes and the international inspection system that such an exchange would require. Lawrence's suggestion that a demonstration of the atomic bomb might possibly