

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73536-0 - The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan

Wilson D. Miscamble

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

## The Most Controversial Decision

The commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki sparked a significant scholarly and popular dispute in the United States. A bevy of books appeared wrestling with questions concerning the necessity, the wisdom, and the morality of America's use of the new weapon in 1945.<sup>1</sup> An even more inflammatory and public controversy centered on the text developed to accompany the planned exhibit at the Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution of a part of the fuselage of the *Enola Gay*, the American B-29 aircraft that dropped the atomic weapon on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Supposedly reflecting the most recent scholarly findings and self-consciously unafraid to puncture prevailing national "myths," the Smithsonian text gave a privileged voice to an interpretation that held that the atomic bomb was not necessary to either end the Pacific War or to save American lives. The predictable public outrage apparently caught the Smithsonian curators by surprise. The historian J. Samuel Walker recounted that "veterans' groups led a fusillade of attacks that accused

<sup>1</sup> A sample of the works published around the fiftieth anniversary includes Gar Alperovitz et al., *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York, 1995); Robert James Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (Columbia, MO, 1995); Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York, 1995); Robert P. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* (East Lansing, MI, 1995); and Stanley Weintraub, *The Last Great Victory: The End of World War II, July–August 1945* (New York, 1995). The more recent sixtieth anniversary passed in more subdued fashion with a mere flurry of op-ed pieces and magazine articles published in early August 2005. For the best of these, see Richard B. Frank, "Why Truman Dropped the Bomb," *The Weekly Standard*, 10 (August 8, 2005), pp. 20–25.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73536-0 - The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan

Wilson D. Miscamble

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the Smithsonian of making the use of the bomb appear aggressive, immoral, and unjustified.”<sup>2</sup> With considerable congressional support, the aging veterans, members of the proverbial greatest generation, forced the Smithsonian to back down, to modify the text considerably, and to alter the thrust of the exhibit. This led in turn to lengthy lamentations that blatant political pressure had censored a well-researched, historical presentation.<sup>3</sup>

The commotion surrounding the *Enola Gay* exhibit ultimately generated much more heat than light. It proved to be just another in a long series of disputes and debates that has made the use of the atomic bombs without doubt President Harry S. Truman’s most controversial decision. At base these debates arose out of a rejection of the arguments put forth by policy makers like Truman and his Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson that the atomic bomb “obviated the need for an invasion of Japan, accelerated the conclusion of the war, and saved a vast number of American lives.”<sup>4</sup> Especially after the appearance of Gar Alperovitz’s *Atomic Diplomacy* in 1965, various writers increasingly challenged the notion that the atomic bombs were needed to defeat a Japan that supposedly stood very close to surrender. Alperovitz has been nothing if not consistent, and in his massive book marking the fiftieth anniversary of the bomb’s use he reiterated his contentious thesis along with its corollary that the Truman administration used the atomic weapons as part of its diplomacy aimed primarily at the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> As one close observer of the atomic debate noted, Alperovitz’s work “redirected the focus of questions that scholars asked about the bomb.” Instead of attending to the necessity of the bomb, “the central questions had become: What factors were paramount in the decision to use the bomb and why was its use more attractive to policymakers than other alternatives.”<sup>6</sup> This seemingly subtle change of emphasis in

<sup>2</sup> J. Samuel Walker, “The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update,” in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations Since 1941* (Cambridge and New York, 1995), p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> For further details of the Smithsonian controversy told largely from the perspective of those sympathetic to the originally planned exhibition, see Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Englehardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York, 1996). For a more critical treatment of the exhibit, see Robert P. Newman, “*Enola Gay* at Air and Space: Anonymity, Hypocrisy, Ignorance,” in Robert James Maddox, ed., *Hiroshima in History: The Myths of Revisionism* (Columbia, MO, 2007), pp. 171–189.

<sup>4</sup> Walker summarizes this position in his “The Decision to Use the Bomb,” p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> See Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Drop the Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth*.

<sup>6</sup> Walker, “The Decision to Use the Bomb,” p. 213.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73536-0 - The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan

Wilson D. Miscamble

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

effect put the Truman administration on trial for its use of the powerful new weapons. Why had it done what wasn't really necessary went the reasoning implicit in this approach.

The questions a historian asks hold great importance and influence significantly how well any explorer of the past can map and understand its difficult terrain. In such contested and controversial territory as the use of the atomic bombs, it seems wise to clarify at the outset the questions that this book addresses and seeks to answer. Essentially, it examines why the bombs were used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and then goes on to investigate the role they played in Japan's surrender. Pursuing these fundamental matters allows for other fascinating questions to be addressed. Would Truman's great predecessor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, have used the atomic bombs in the manner that Truman authorized? Did the likely possession of the atomic bombs transform American military calculations as the Pacific War came to an end, and alter American intentions toward its then Soviet ally? Were the Japanese really on the verge of surrender before the atomic bombs were used? Should the bombing of Hiroshima be seen as the opening salvo in the Cold War as Gar Alperovitz suggested so provocatively more than forty years ago? How is the Potsdam conference (July 17–August 2, 1945), Truman's one and only exercise in Big Three summitry, related to America's possession of the atomic bomb? Answers to such questions help shed light on the crucial issue regarding the necessity of using these terrible weapons to force Japan's defeat.<sup>7</sup> These matters are surely the province of the historian and might reasonably suffice in an effort to understand Truman's decision making and its consequences. Yet, given the intensity of the conflict surrounding the atomic bomb, it seems essential to also confront the question regarding the morality of the atomic bomb. Thus, this book explores whether it was right for the United States to use this weapon against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I find convincing the observation of the Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis that one "can't escape thinking about history in moral terms" and rather than doing this implicitly or subconsciously I prefer here to engage the issue explicitly.<sup>8</sup> I trust my analysis might instigate good reflection and discussion among my readers.

I have not sought to engage in any detailed refutation of the work of other historians, although this book assuredly revises and directly

<sup>7</sup> See the very helpful chapter on "Key Questions and Interpretations," in Michael Kort, *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* (New York, 2007), pp. 81–116.

<sup>8</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York, 2002), p. 122.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73536-0 - The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan

Wilson D. Miscamble

Excerpt

[More information](#)

challenges certain past interpretations. Rather, my effort here takes account of the available and extensive documentary evidence on this much debated issue, and it draws on the best scholarship on the subject. It also seeks to take into account the most recent work on the use of the atomic bombs. The continuing appearance of new studies testifies to the enduring effort to understand and explain the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The effort in this book to understand and explain Truman's decision to use the atomic bombs draws heavily on my earlier book *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War*.<sup>9</sup> In that book I made a genuine effort to treat Truman as more than a one-dimensional figure. I sought to reveal him as the more complex man he truly was – one blessed with certain strengths and beset with notable limitations, who was occasionally given to uncertainty and indecision on matters of foreign policy. Understanding this more complicated figure allows for a deeper appreciation of his foreign policy and his decision making. So too does a firm grasp of the circumstances in which he operated. This book, like *From Roosevelt to Truman*, accepts the complexity, the uncertainty, the sheer messiness of policy making. It tries to convey the tense atmosphere in which policy makers worked, the heavy pressures they endured, and the complex of influences that weighed upon them. I trust it will lead readers to better understand Truman and his most controversial decision.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson D. Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* (New York and Cambridge, 2007).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73536-0 - The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan

Wilson D. Miscamble

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER I

**Franklin Roosevelt, the Manhattan Project,  
and the Development of the Atomic Bomb**

Harry Truman bore the ultimate responsibility for the use of the atomic bombs, but the American decision to develop these weapons for use in World War II was made by Franklin Roosevelt. Truman's predecessor is a dominant political figure of the twentieth century. His place in American history rests secure as a great leader in peace and war, a brilliant political practitioner, and the measuring rod for all subsequent presidents. In the depths of depression he helped restore to an almost despairing nation real hope and energy with his New Deal measures. He overcame the powerful forces of American isolationism and unilateralism in the years from 1939 to 1941 and supported Great Britain and the Soviet Union in their deathly struggle against Hitler's Germany. After Pearl Harbor he convinced the American people that they faced a truly global challenge, which required the defeat of both Germany and Japan. He led a unified nation through to the brink of ultimate victory in the greatest armed conflict in history.

Yet, when examining Roosevelt's portrait more closely and beyond the broad brush strokes formed by his buoyant leadership of his nation through the Depression and the Second World War, his picture becomes more blurred. Roosevelt might best be thought of as a remarkable exemplar of the "political fox" in action.<sup>1</sup> He was never limited by any central conviction or purpose. Rather as a "magnificently resourceful improviser" and "a virtuoso in the use of power" he displayed during the New Deal a

<sup>1</sup> See Owen Harries, "The Day of the Fox," *National Interest*, 29 (Fall, 1992), pp. 109–112. Harries's terms are inspired by Isaiah Berlin's famous essay on Tolstoy, "The Hedgehog and the Fox." Also note, of course, James MacGregor Burns's classic study *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York, 1956).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73536-0 - The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan

Wilson D. Miscamble

Excerpt

[More information](#)

willingness to shift directions and to vary his methods without inhibition as circumstances required. He relied more heavily on the force of his personality than on the force or consistency of his ideas. At times he avoided arduous study of complex issues and chose not to outline detailed plans. This certainly characterized his involvement in the development of the atomic bomb.

While FDR's policy commitments and purposes occasionally proved difficult to pin down, no observer ever doubted his mastery of the White House and his complete comfort with and confidence in his use of presidential power. He dominated all those who served in his administration, and utilized the practices of dividing authority and assigning overlapping responsibilities to pit subordinates against one another and to make himself the locus for all major decisions.<sup>2</sup> Those who wanted to prompt any decisive action by the American government knew they must contact and convince President Roosevelt. So, at least, thought the great physicist and refugee from Nazi Germany, Albert Einstein.

On August 2, 1939, Einstein wrote to Roosevelt that "the element uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the immediate future." Having been briefed on the subject himself by Leo Szilard, a brilliant Hungarian physicist and fellow refugee, Einstein explained further to the American leader that "it may become possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium, by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated." Such scientific details were hardly designed to capture the president's interest, but the distinguished scientist assuredly hoped the president would attend to his warning that "this new phenomenon would also lead to the construction of a bomb and it is conceivable – though much less certain – that extremely powerful bombs of a new type may thus be constructed."<sup>3</sup> Einstein offered suggestions to address the broad issue, and asked that a relationship be established between the administration and physicists, like Szilard and Enrico Fermi, a refugee from Fascist Italy and the 1938 Nobel laureate, who were researching these chain reactions. He also requested enhanced funding for the physicists' experiments and for a national effort to secure plentiful sources of

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Maney makes this point in *The Roosevelt Presence: A Biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York, 1992), p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Einstein to Roosevelt, August 2, 1939 in Kort, *Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb*, p. 172. For a helpful and accessible discussion of "the science of nuclear weapons" see Joseph M. Siracusa, *Nuclear Weapons: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York, 2008), pp. 2–6.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73536-0 - The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan

Wilson D. Miscamble

Excerpt

[More information](#)*FDR, the Manhattan Project, and the Atomic Bomb*

7

uranium. Einstein closed his letter by apprising Roosevelt that German scientists also were engaged in work similar to that of Szilard and Fermi, and that Hitler's nation had moved to secure its own sources of uranium. He felt no need to explicate the dangerous implications of this German research.

Despite his great scientific reputation Einstein had no easy entrée to or helpful contacts in the White House. The president only read his letter and discussed it on October 11 when he met with Alexander Sachs, a Wall Street economist and political associate, who served as an intermediary for the scientists. By this time Nazi Germany had attacked Poland and World War II had begun. The president's attention understandably focused on the current crisis, but he referred Einstein's letter to an exploratory committee consisting of Sachs and representatives of the Army and Navy and headed by Dr. Lyman Briggs, director of the Bureau of Standards. This committee reported on November 1 and indicated support for research on whether a chain reaction could produce a bomb. It offered some limited support for the scientists and authorized the modest sum of six thousand dollars to help build what would be the world's first nuclear reactor at the University of Chicago. "These funds," Michael Kort noted, "turned out to be the miniscule down payment for a project that ultimately would cost two billion dollars."<sup>4</sup> It was hardly an auspicious start.

During 1940, American scientists continued their modest and mainly theoretical research in their university laboratories while still afraid that German scientists might steal ahead in a race to build a bomb. Their fears were shared across the Atlantic by scientists in a Great Britain now locked in mortal combat with Nazi Germany and fighting on alone after the fall of France in June of that year. While the fighters of the Royal Air Force held off the *Luftwaffe* in the skies above, British physicists working in crucial collaboration with various émigrés who had escaped the Nazis pursued what they named the Tube Alloys project exploring the feasibility of a bomb. They reached important conclusions regarding the uranium isotope, U-235, and how it might be applied to create a nuclear fission weapon. The British presented the results of their research in the report of the MAUD (incidentally a code name and not an acronym) Committee in July 1941. They spoke to the practicality of constructing the bomb even by the end of 1943, and predicted it would be of decisive importance in the war.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Kort, *Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> On the British efforts see Margaret Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy, 1939-1945* (New York, 1964).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73536-0 - The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan

Wilson D. Miscamble

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Although the United States had still not formally entered the war, the British shared the MAUD report in October 1941 with Roosevelt's science advisers, now led by Vannevar Bush, who directed the Office of Scientific Research and Development. In contrast to Einstein's letter the MAUD report provoked a more high-powered response. Roosevelt now seemed to grasp the danger that German success in producing such a weapon represented. He wrote Churchill to secure further cooperation between the British and American efforts. Soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, and the German declaration of war against the United States four days later, FDR authorized Bush to develop an atomic bomb. By June 1942 Bush counseled the president that the U.S. Army must take over the huge work of constructing the factories and facilities to produce the essential fissionable materials to make the atomic weapons. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers assigned the project to the Manhattan Engineering District headquartered in New York City, and it became known then and subsequently as the Manhattan Project.

The story of the vast endeavor to produce the atomic bombs has been well told elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> It suffices to say that it brought together the top scientists of the day, including many exiles from Nazi and Fascist Europe, and combined them with the vast productive capability of American industry as applied through companies like the DuPont Corporation. In September 1942 after some troublesome initial months, Brig. Gen. Leslie Groves took command of the Manhattan Project. A hard-driving and determined officer of conservative disposition who had just overseen the construction of the Pentagon building, Groves took literally his instructions from Secretary of War Henry Stimson to produce a bomb "at the earliest possible date so as to bring the war to a conclusion."<sup>7</sup> His deputy later described General Groves as "the biggest sonofabitch I've ever met in my life, but also one of the most capable," and under his relentless direction three major research and production sites were developed at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Hanford, Washington, and Los Alamos, New Mexico.<sup>8</sup> The first two huge operations focused on producing the materials for a bomb, which by now included not only U-235 but also plutonium (Pu-239), a new transuranic element discovered by the brilliant chemist Glenn Seaborg by bombarding the more common

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York, 1986); and Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., *The New World, 1939–1946*, Vol. I, *A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission* (University Park, PA, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> Groves quoted in Kort, *Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Col. Kenneth Nichols quoted in Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, p. 426.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73536-0 - The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan

Wilson D. Miscamble

Excerpt

[More information](#)

*FDR, the Manhattan Project, and the Atomic Bomb*

9



PHOTO 1. The so-called odd couple who led the Manhattan Project: Maj. Gen. Leslie Groves and Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer. (Courtesy Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.)

uranium isotope U-238 with neutrons. The Los Alamos site served as the weapons research and design laboratory to fashion both the U-235 and the plutonium into usable bombs. This was a monumental challenge and ultimate success was at no point fully guaranteed. Yet, it would be there in the New Mexico desert that the first atomic device would be tested three years later.

In mid-October 1942, just weeks after his own appointment, Groves selected a cosmopolitan and sensitive Berkeley physicist of leftist political sympathies named Robert Oppenheimer to direct the Los Alamos

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73536-0 - The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan

Wilson D. Miscamble

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PHOTO 2. Three of the leading scientists at Los Alamos – E. O. Lawrence, Enrico Fermi, and Isidor I. Rabi. (Courtesy Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.)

laboratory. Oppenheimer loved the poetry of John Donne and read the *Bhagavad Gita*, the great Hindu epic, in the original Sanskrit, which left Groves quite unimpressed. Yet, the blunt military officer sensed intuitively that Oppenheimer could lead the diverse and brilliant group of scientists who would be gathered under the umbrella of the Manhattan Project – men such as the Nobel laureates Ernest Lawrence, Enrico Fermi, and Isidor Rabi. As is often noted they made an unlikely match – someone later quipped it was “Godzilla meets Hamlet” – but they developed a formidable