PRESIDENT TRUMAN, THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, AND THE ATOMIC BOMB

Like the essays reprinted in chapters 1 and 2, this one, too, was occasioned by an anniversary: not another A-bomb anniversary this time, but the centennial of Harry Truman’s birth (1884). In 1983, I received an invitation to participate in a scholarly conference marking this event, to be held the following year at the Smithsonian Institution’s Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. This conference provided an occasion for me to link my research on the responses of the American people to the atomic bomb, a topic in which I was then immersed, with Truman’s own public pronouncements and (scanty) private reflections on the bomb.

As I prepared my paper, I was struck by the parallelism of the responses the bomb elicited from the American people and from the American president—responses ranging from giddy euphoria and rigid self-justification to sober second thoughts and uneasy fears. This chapter is adapted from the paper I first presented orally at that 1984 conference, and then expanded for the published volume of conference papers (Michael J. Lacey, ed., The Truman Presidency [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989]). My principal memory from the conference itself is of Truman adviser Clark Clifford commenting emotionally on how many lives the atomic bomb had spared, Japanese as well as American, by rendering unnecessary an invasion of Japan—a faithful echo of an argument Truman himself had often advanced.
FOR MILLIONS OF AMERICANS born before World War II, memories of President Truman are inextricably interwoven with memories of the atomic bomb. To be sure, Franklin D. Roosevelt had launched the Manhattan Project, but that was all in secret. It was Truman who announced the staggering news to the world on August 6, 1945, who was central to the controversies of 1946–47 over both domestic and international control of atomic energy, who announced the first Russian atomic-bomb test in September 1949, and who in January 1950 authorized development of the hydrogen bomb.

For anyone interested in Harry Truman and his presidency, the question of the atomic bomb is clearly central. For the historian concerned with the bomb’s effect on American thought and culture, Truman is a key figure. Curiously, however, neither Truman scholars nor historians studying the evolution of popular attitudes toward nuclear weapons have given Truman’s comments about the atomic bomb the close attention that one might expect. We have excellent studies of Truman’s role in the diplomacy, strategy, and domestic politics of the early postwar period as they related to the atomic bomb, but relatively little attention has been given to a systematic analysis of his views on the atomic bomb per se.

One reason for this is probably the elusive nature of the evidence. Truman had a good deal to say about the atomic bomb, as about most subjects, but much of it was ad hoc and fragmentary. Rarely, if ever, did he offer a comprehensive account of the development of his view of the bomb and its meaning. Adding to the challenge is the fact that Truman commented on the bomb at three quite distinct levels of discourse, two of which have only gradually become accessible to historians. The first level (public pronouncements, formal addresses, messages to Congress, and so on) has, of course, been known for decades, and much of it is so familiar as to be difficult to read with a fresh eye. The second level (oral and written communication that passed between Truman and his advisers) has unfolded only gradually and in piecemeal fashion with the publication of memoirs by participants and the opening of various manuscript and archive collections. Finally, there is the intensely interesting level of Truman’s relatively uncensored private reflections, expressed in diary jottings or in personal letters to his wife, Bess, or his daughter, Margaret.
Much of this material, often in striking variance to his public pronounce­ments, has become available only in the past few years.

This essay draws together some of what we know about Truman's thinking on this subject and relates it to the larger pattern of American attitudes toward the atomic bomb in the early postwar years. Such an effort is revealing in several ways. First, it brings into sharp focus aspects of Truman's character and his mode of dealing with issues. Second, it illustrates how profoundly the advent of this awesome new force could disrupt and disorient even so down-to-earth a man as Truman, producing some quite striking contradictions and inconsistencies. Third, Tru­man's response to the bomb, in all its ambiguity, mirrors in an uncanny fashion the larger response of the American people. The uncertainties and ambivalences in Truman's own mind on this subject were simul­taneously being played out on the larger stage of public discourse and cultural expression in this early post-Hiroshima period. Finally, of course, the views expressed by Truman and top members of his administration on the atomic bomb are important to the cultural historian not only because they mirror the broader national response, but also because they helped shape it.

JUSTIFICATIONS FOR DROPPING THE BOMB

President Truman was lunching with the crew of the USS Augusta on August 6, 1945, steaming westward across the Atlantic en route home from the Potsdam conference, when a radio message from Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson informed him that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima had been a “complete success.” “This is the greatest thing in history,” he spontaneously exclaimed. After breaking the news to the cheering sailors, he rushed to the wardroom to tell the officers, amid more cheers and excitement.

Meanwhile, in Washington, a prearranged news release had been issued that morning by the White House under Truman's name, informing the world that an atomic bomb had been “loosed against those who brought war in the Far East.” In this critically important announce­ment, which shaped Americans' initial perceptions of the bomb, Truman
offered only two brief justifications for its use against Japan. First, he cited Tokyo’s surprise attack on the United States in 1941: “The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many-fold.” Second, he noted that the Japanese had rejected the Allied surrender ultimatum issued at Potsdam on July 26, 1945—an ultimatum that had warned them of “complete and utter destruction” if they did not surrender unconditionally.

In less formal comments at this time, Truman further justified the atomic bombing on two additional grounds: Japan’s wartime atrocities and the racist assertion that the Japanese were subhuman creatures to whom the moral restraint that nations (at least professedly) observed in wartime need not apply. These interwoven themes emerged most clearly in Truman’s response to a post-Hiroshima telegram from an official of the Federal Council of Churches, an association of liberal Protestant denominations, urging that no further atomic bombs be dropped. Truman’s answer, written on August 9 with the knowledge that a second atomic bomb would in fact be dropped momentarily, declared, “Nobody is more disturbed over the use of the atomic bomb than I am, but I was greatly disturbed over the unwarranted attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor and their murder of our prisoners of war. The only language they seem to understand is the one we have been using to bombard them. When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true.”

As wartime passions subsided after Japan’s surrender, another justification emerged. The atomic bomb was the only alternative to an invasion of Japan that would have cost many American lives. The gist of this argument was contained in Truman’s message to Congress of October 3, 1945, on the subject of atomic-energy legislation. “We know,” the president declared unequivocally, “that [the atomic bomb] saved the lives of untold thousands of American soldiers who would otherwise have been killed in battle.” Truman became more specific in his address at the annual Gridiron Dinner in Washington on December 15, 1945. Purporting to describe his thought process at the time he made the atomic-bomb decision, he declared, “It occurred to me, that a quarter of a million of the flower of our young manhood were worth a couple of Japanese cities, and I still think they were and are.”
This argument was most fully elaborated in an extremely influential February 1947 *Harper's* magazine article by former secretary of war Henry L. Stimson. Had the atomic bomb not been employed as it was, Stimson contended, a full-scale invasion of Japan, first of Kyushu and then of the main island of Honshu, would have been necessary. This would have extended the war through 1946, he insisted, and entailed horrendous losses: “I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties to American forces alone. Additional large losses might be expected among our allies, and of course, if our campaign was successful and if we could judge by previous experience, enemy casualties would be much larger than our own.” Repeating this argument in his 1953 memoirs, Winston Churchill inflated Stimson’s projection of a million American casualties (i.e., killed, wounded, and missing) into a million American deaths, plus a half million British ones.

With the passing years, Truman insisted ever more rigidly that the atomic-bomb decision was totally justified, that he had never had a moment’s second thoughts, and that he would unhesitatingly make the same decision again. “I regarded the bomb as a military weapon,” he wrote in his 1955 memoirs, “and never had any doubt that it should be used.” A fundamental element of Truman’s public persona was his cocky self-confidence, with no hint of self-doubt or even of second thoughts about his major decisions. As he wrote in 1957, “I hardly ever look back for the purpose of contemplating ‘what might have been.’” Nothing illustrates this trait more clearly than the tone of absolute assurance he adopted in all public comment on the atomic-bomb decision. From August 6, 1945, until his death in 1972, Truman invariably rejected with great vehemence any suggestion that the atomic destruction of two cities might have been unnecessary militarily, tragic in its long-range implications, or problematic on ethical grounds. When J. Robert Oppenheimer, in a White House meeting with Truman shortly after the war, expressed remorse over the dropping of the atomic bomb and alluded to scientists’ feelings that they had blood on their hands, Truman contemptuously ridiculed this “crybaby” reaction. (According to one version of the encounter, Truman pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and derisively offered it to Oppenheimer to wipe the blood off his hands.)
So intent was Truman on maintaining his posture of absolute certitude regarding this question that he eventually erected a kind of invisible shield around the subject to ward off any probing by himself or anyone else. In one of his now-famous unmailed letters, he in 1962 unleashed a memorable blast at diplomatic historian Herbert Feis, who was raising troublesome questions as he sought to re-create the strategic considerations underlying the bomb decision. Wrote Truman to Feis:

> It ended the Jap War. That was the objective. Now if you can think of any other . . . egghead contemplations, bring them out. You get the same answer—to end the Jap War and save ¼ of a million of our youngsters and many Japs from death and twice that many on each side from being maimed for life.

> It is a great thing that you or any other contemplator “after the fact” didn’t have to make the decision. Our boys would all be dead.

The following year, in another unsent letter, this one to Chicago Sun-Times columnist Irv Kupcinet, Truman wrote, “I knew what I was doing when I stopped the war that would have killed a half million youngsters on both sides if those bombs had not been dropped. I have no regrets and, under the same circumstances, I would do it again—and this letter is not confidential.” Toward the end of his life, when the producers of a television special on his career suggested a trip to Hiroshima in connection with the atomic bomb episode, Truman proclaimed, “I’ll go to Japan, if that’s what you want, but I won’t kiss their ass.”

Why did Truman react so violently to even the whisper of doubt about his atomic-bomb decision? Why the insults, ridicule, contempt, and abuse toward those who tried to penetrate his shell of self-righteous certitude? In part, of course, this was simply another manifestation of the cocky self-confidence so central to Truman’s public image. Was more involved? Did the strident certainty that eventually reached self-parody perhaps mask a bad conscience? Despite the evidence of Alamogordo, did Truman still not wholly grasp, prior to August 6, the bomb’s full destructive magnitude? In his memoirs, he makes clear that he carefully
went over the atomic-bomb target list of Japanese cities with his military leaders, and in retrospect he insists that he was fully aware that the bomb "would inflict damage and casualties beyond imagination" and was "potentially capable of wiping out entire cities." Yet on July 5, as the final order for the bomb's use was being drawn up, he wrote in his diary, "I have told the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. . . . He and I are in accord. The target will be a purely military one." In the same vein, the August 6 news release described Hiroshima, a city of 350,000, simply as "an important Japanese Army base."

In the days immediately after August 6, before Truman's pronouncements about the bomb decision became so rigid, there are hints that he was shaken and dismayed as the full horror of the civilian toll sank in. On August 7 (in significant contrast to his assertion two days later, "When you deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast"), Truman rejected Senator Richard B. Russell's demand that the Japanese must be brought "groveling to their knees," commenting: "I can't bring myself to believe that because they are beasts we should ourselves act in the same manner." And, according to Henry Wallace's diary, at the cabinet meeting of August 10, the day after the Nagasaki bombing, "Truman said he had given orders to stop atomic bombing. He said the thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible. He didn't like the idea of killing, as he said, 'all those kids.'"

Obviously, such sketchy evidence as this does not prove conclusively that Truman felt uneasy about his decision. Yet if the full evidence of the bomb's power to obliterate entire cities did shock and somewhat unnerve him, making a mockery of his earlier insistence on "purely military" targets, the very stridency of his later efforts to place his decision beyond the reach of criticism or even discussion may have been his way of dealing with fugitive doubts that he never openly expressed and perhaps never fully acknowledged even to himself.

How successful were Truman's efforts to explain and justify his atomic-bomb decision? From the first, the president's contention that the atomic bomb was the only alternative to an invasion of Japan aroused skepticism in some quarters. As early as 1946, on the basis of a detailed study of the state of the Japanese war effort by the summer of 1945 and
exhaustive interviews with high Japanese officials, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that Japan would have surrendered “certainly prior to December 31, 1945, and in all probability prior to November 1, 1945, . . . even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.”

Beginning with Gar Alperovitz’s *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (1965) and continuing with such works as Martin J. Sherwin’s *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (1977), a considerable body of historical scholarship has emerged that reinforces the conclusion of the Strategic Bombing Survey and convincingly shows that calculations involving the Soviet Union were more fundamental to the decision-making process than Truman’s or Stimson’s version of that process acknowledged. These works have made clear that Japan was almost desperately seeking to end the war by July 1945 and that, thanks to the breaking of the Japanese communications code, these efforts were known to President Truman. Truman’s own memoirs acknowledge that as early as the end of May, after the Okinawa campaign, Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew (the only high administration official with extended experience in Japan) informed Truman of his belief that the Japanese would surrender if they were assured that the emperor could remain on his throne.

The Truman diaries and family letters that have become available to scholars in the past few years further support the revisionist critique of the Truman-Stimson version of the atomic-bomb decision. For example, when Stalin reaffirmed at Potsdam his Yalta pledge to declare war on Japan three months after Germany’s surrender, Truman was exultant. “He’ll be in Jap War on August 15,” Truman wrote in his diary on July 17. “Finsi Japs when that comes about.” To Bess he wrote: “I’ve gotten what I came for—Stalin goes to war on August 15. . . . I’ll say that we’ll end the war a year sooner, now, and think of the kids who won’t be killed. That is the important thing.” By mid-July, in short, Truman knew that Japan was on the verge of surrender, and he was convinced that the Soviet Union’s forthcoming declaration of war would provide the final push. As historian Robert Messer has recently argued, the issue occupying Truman’s mind in these critical days was not the nightmare of a costly
land invasion of Japan, but the precise means by which Japan's imminent collapse would be achieved.

As the stunning success of the Alamogordo test became apparent, Truman realized that the United States, and not the Soviets, could provide the final blow. "Believe Japs will fold up before Russia comes in," Truman wrote in his diary on July 18. "I am sure they will when Manhattan [the atomic bomb] appears over their homeland." When Stimson flew to Potsdam and gave Truman a full briefing on Alamogordo, the president was (according to Stimson's diary) "tremendously pepped up" and displayed "an entirely new feeling of confidence." Repeatedly Truman thanked Stimson for the report and for "being present to help him in this way." In a 1948 letter to Margaret, Truman regretted that he had worked so hard at Potsdam to get Stalin to reaffirm his pledge to enter the Pacific war: "All of us wanted Russia in the Japanese War. Had we known what the Atomic Bomb would do we'd have never wanted the Bear in the picture."

The precise casualty estimates that Truman cited so authoritatively whenever he discussed the hypothetical invasion that the atomic bomb allegedly prevented have come in for critical scrutiny as well. After an exhaustive study of this aspect of the debate over the atomic-bomb decision, Rufus E. Miles Jr., a former senior fellow of Princeton's Woodrow Wilson Center, argued in the Fall 1985 issue of International Security that the figure of a quarter million casualties was "an 'off-the-top-of-the-head' estimate made in the early spring of 1945, before the war and navy departments realized how rapid was the deterioration of Japan's capacity to resist, and then uncritically repeated on various occasions after the situation had radically changed."

Truman's immediate purpose, however, was to persuade not historians but the American electorate that the atomic bombing of Japan had been necessary and praiseworthy, and in this he succeeded brilliantly. Public opinion polls in the autumn of 1945 revealed overwhelming approval ratings; in newspaper editorials, approval was practically unanimous.

Truman's arguments all struck a responsive popular chord. His linking of Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima resonated strongly with Americans, who recalled vividly the treachery of December 7, 1941, and for whom
“Remember Pearl Harbor” had been the most powerful of wartime slogans. Countless post-Hiroshima editorials, cartoons, and letters to the editor enthusiastically endorsed Truman’s assertion that the atomic bomb was fair retribution for Japanese atrocities in the Philippines and the brutal island campaigns of the Pacific. Some of this commentary reflected the same racism that underlay Truman’s description of the Japanese as beasts. As John Dower argued in *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (1986), American anti-Japanese propaganda during the war was deeply racist, and it is hardly surprising that racist arguments and images should have been employed in the rush to justify the atomic bomb. Some newspaper letters expressed regret that atomic bombs had not been used to destroy *all* human life in Japan.

Truman’s claim that the only alternative to the atomic bomb would have been a protracted land war also went largely unquestioned. But why did most Americans believe so eagerly and uncritically that, if the atomic bomb had not been used, the war would have dragged on for perhaps another eighteen months at a hideous cost in blood and suffering? Why, in the face of the mounting body of historical evidence to the contrary, do many, perhaps most, Americans still remain firmly convinced that the bomb “saved hundreds of thousands of American lives”? The answer, presumably, is that myths of this tenacity serve necessary psychological functions. As Rufus E. Miles Jr. has observed:

> The use of these figures [estimating invasion casualties] by Truman and others can be explained by a subconscious compulsion to persuade themselves and the American public that, horrible as the atomic bombs were, their use was actually humane inasmuch as it saved a huge number of lives. The larger the estimate of deaths averted, the more self-evidently justified the action seemed. Exaggerating these figures avoided, in large part, the awkward alternative of having to rethink and explain a complex set of circumstances and considerations that influenced the decision to drop the bomb.

Not everyone concurred in the government’s rationalizations. The nuclear annihilation of well over a hundred thousand men, women, and
children of a defeated nation teetering on the brink of surrender was not, for some, so easily dismissed. Even in the fervid emotional climate of the war and its immediate aftermath, a small minority of Americans expressed grave reservations about the official deeds performed in their name. Others who did not categorically condemn Truman’s decision were nevertheless unprepared to accept his strident insistence that the action was so obviously justified as not even to merit reflection or debate. These responses, too, constituted a part of the post-Hiroshima cultural and moral landscape, and as such they deserve attention and study. But the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of Americans, as well as the nation’s principal media outlets, found little to question in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The pattern of Truman’s own response to the bomb—vociferous public justification with an undercurrent of barely acknowledged uneasiness and doubt—accurately reflected and encapsulated the reaction of the larger American public.

**THE LARGER MEANING OF ATOMIC ENERGY**

What of the atomic future? What were the implications of the unleashing of the atom? And what larger meanings could one extract from this momentous event? Here, too, the responses of President Truman, both public and private, paralleled and helped shape those of the larger public. Again his initial announcement of August 6, 1945, must be the starting point. This eleven-hundred-word message provided no information, even of the sketchiest sort, about the probable human or physical toll at Hiroshima. The Alamogordo test and the scale of destructiveness it had demonstrated were passed over in silence. Radiation was unmentioned.

Rather, the theme of the message was upbeat and positive. The drama and vast scope of the Manhattan Project were vividly evoked, underscoring the supremacy of U.S. industrial might and technological know-how:

> We now have two great plants and many lesser works devoted to the production of atomic power. Employment during peak construction numbered 125,000 and
over 65,000 individuals are even now engaged in operating the plants. Many have worked there for two and a half years. Few know what they have been producing. They see great quantities of material going in and they see nothing coming out of these plants, for the physical size of the explosive charge is exceedingly small. We have spent two billion dollars on the greatest scientific gamble in history—and won.

Truman's announcement dwelled on the scientific achievement of the Manhattan Project even more than on its technological wonder. For the United States in 1945, news of the atomic bomb came embedded in a glowing hymn of praise to science: "The greatest marvel is not the size of the enterprise, its secrecy, nor its cost, but the achievement of scientific brains in putting together infinitely complex pieces of knowledge held by many men in different fields of science into a workable plan. . . . The brain child of many minds came forth in physical shape and performed as it was supposed to do. . . . What has been done is the greatest achievement of organized science in history."

This dramatic scientific breakthrough, Truman continued, held vast promise for enlarging human knowledge; it ushered in "a new era in man's understanding of nature's forces." Truman reiterated the point in his October 3, 1945, atomic-energy message to Congress. Although the atom posed "potential danger," it was "at the same time . . . full of promise for the future of man and for the peace of the world."

As for immediate practical benefits to be expected from this triumph of science, Truman's August 6 announcement struck a cautious note, warning that only after "a long period of intensive research" would atomic energy be available for nonmilitary purposes. But soon the cautionary note faded in a glow of hyperbole. Atomic energy, proclaimed Truman in his October 3 message, "may someday prove to be more revolutionary in the development of human society than the invention of the wheel, the use of metals, or steam or internal combustion engines." Speaking extemporaneously at a county fair in Missouri at about the same time, he predicted that knowledge of the atom would lead to "the happiest world that the sun has ever shone upon."
The positive side was also emphasized in several of Truman's State of the Union messages, although the advent of the atomic bomb, surely a major event of 1945, was not even mentioned in Truman's first such message in January 1946. When he first raised the subject of atomic energy in his January 1947 speech, it was in the context of the atom's great promise: "In the vigorous and effective development of peaceful uses of atomic energy," the president declared, "rests our hope that this new force may ultimately be turned into a blessing for all nations." Truman expressed similar bright hopes in the rest of his State of the Union messages.

If Henry Stimson was Truman's principal collaborator in the campaign to justify the decision to drop the atomic bomb, his most effective lieutenant in promulgating the message of the peaceful atom was David E. Lilienthal. As head of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1930s, Lilienthal had emerged as a tireless public advocate for large-scale federal development projects. As chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) from its creation in 1946 until 1950, Lilienthal brought the same zeal and eloquence to spreading the vision of a world transformed by atomic energy. Often featured in the press as "Mr. Atom," Lilienthal labored mightily to flesh out Truman's message and give a benevolent aura to the new atomic reality. While debunking the more ludicrously exaggerated claims of some popularizers, Lilienthal extolled the atom's peacetime promise in numerous speeches and magazine articles. In a nationally broadcast 1948 high school graduation address delivered at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, he spoke with almost grating optimism of the vast future benefits of atomic energy, promising "one of the blessed periods of all human history."

Lilienthal frequently described atomic energy as simply a form of solar energy—and potentially as beneficial. As he told another high school graduating class in 1947, the sun was nothing but "a huge atomic-energy factory." Such pronouncements reflected Lilienthal's almost mystical belief in the power of positive thinking—his conviction that merely to turn people's thoughts from the atomic bomb to speculation about possible peacetime applications, whatever the actual reality, was a significant social achievement.

Truman strongly backed Lilienthal's efforts to turn the public mind
from atomic weapons to the promise of atomic energy. Dramatizing this theme, at the initiative of the AEC he sent a telegram to an international conference of cancer specialists meeting at St. Louis in 1947, announcing that scientists all over the world would be given access to radioactive isotopes (by-products of the government's nuclear-weapons program) to aid in the fight against cancer. During a February 1950 meeting with Truman, two weeks after the president’s hydrogen-bomb decision, Lilienthal noted in his diary Truman’s full agreement “that my theme of Atoms for Peace is just what the country needs.”

Reflecting Lilienthal’s upbeat emphasis, the AEC in the late 1940s initiated the preparation of booklets, films, exhibitions, and curricular materials publicizing the atom’s beneficent promise. Prominent in this effort was the Brookhaven National Laboratory, a Long Island facility jointly funded and administered by the AEC and nine large eastern universities. Much of the AEC’s limited nonmilitary research was centered at Brookhaven, and members of its staff frequently spoke to public gatherings and the press. Brookhaven’s public relations office assembled two traveling exhibits featuring movies, audiovisual displays, and live demonstrations. Exhibitions were mounted in a number of cities and at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The campaign to counteract the public’s atomic phobia crested in the summer of 1948 with “Man and the Atom,” a month-long multimedia exhibition in New York’s Central Park. This show was jointly sponsored by the AEC, its major corporate contractors for nuclear power development (General Electric and Westinghouse), and the New York Committee on Atomic Information—an umbrella group of various service organizations.

Following the lead of Truman, Lilienthal, and the AEC, the American media in these years heavily promoted the vision of an imminent atomic utopia. Although the “Atoms for Peace” program as a formal U.S. policy initiative dates from President Dwight Eisenhower’s United Nations speech of December 1953, the theme was omnipresent in the Truman years as well. In one of its more dramatic expressions, CBS radio in June 1947 broadcast an hour-long documentary, “The Sunny Side of the Atom,” designed to publicize the vast promise of radioactive isotopes and, according to a publicist, counteract “the ‘scare’ approach to atomic education.”

Numerous magazine feature articles struck the same note, portraying
the enormous promise of the atomic age. The applications of atomic energy to the treatment of cancer and other ills, reported Collier's in May 1947, opened the door to a “golden age of atomic medicine.” This feature was illustrated with a composite photograph of a former paraplegic, healed by atomic energy, emerging smiling from a mushroom-shaped cloud, his empty wheelchair in the background. Foreseeing cures for cancer, heart disease, and other ailments thanks to atomic energy, Operation Atomic Vision, a 1948 high school study unit prepared by the National Education Association, declared: “Many of our generation will reach the century mark. . . . No one will need to work long hours. There will be much leisure, and a network of large recreational areas will cover the country, if not the world.”

This government and media blitz had its effect. In a 1948 Gallup poll, 61 percent of college-educated Americans answered yes to the question: “Do you think that, in the long run, atomic energy will do more good than harm?” Other surveys produced similar results. This emphasis on a thrilling—if somewhat amorphous—atomic utopia ahead, tentatively advanced in President Truman's initial atomic-bomb announcement and then massively reinforced by official and media sources in the succeeding months and years, had a profound influence in molding Americans' initial responses to the nuclear reality.

The positive view of science that pervades Truman's August 6 announcement also mirrored and helped shape the broader public response. In the early post-Hiroshima period, newspapers, magazines, and radio were full of glowing accounts of the Manhattan Project as a crowning triumph of the age of science. Photographs of J. Robert Oppenheimer and other leading physicists stared from every page, and the pronouncements of scientists, from Albert Einstein down to the lowliest physics graduate students caught up in the Manhattan Project, received almost reverent attention. In post-Hiroshima editorial cartoons, scientists typically appear as awesome, larger-than-life figures. In one, a scientist, represented as a person so gigantic that only his lower legs are visible, passes the knowledge of atomic energy to a dwarflike figure labeled “The Statesman.” Another cartoon portraying a somber scientist offering an atom to the human race (represented as a crawling, diaper-clad infant) was captioned, “Baby Play With Nice Ball?”

But as the mixed messages of such cartoons suggest, the post-
Hiroshima view of science had a darker side, and Truman anticipated this, too. Characteristically, however, he did not reveal his bleaker reflections publicly. On July 16, the day he first learned of the successful test at Alamogordo, he wrote in his diary: “I hope for some sort of peace—but I fear that machines are ahead of morals by some centuries and when morals catch up perhaps there’ll be no reason for any of it. I hope not. But we are only termites on a planet and maybe when we bore too deeply into the planet there’ll [be] a reckoning—who knows?” On July 25, after Stimson had flown to Potsdam with a detailed account of the Alamogordo blast by eyewitnesses, Truman characterized the report as “startling—to put it mildly.” Brooding on this “most terrible bomb in the history of the world . . . , the most terrible thing ever discovered,” he expressed his fear of apocalypse in biblical imagery: “It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark.”

In these sober reflections on Alamogordo, Truman uncannily reflected a spontaneous popular response to the Hiroshima news that came a few days later—a response of profound apprehension and even terror, often expressed in nightmarish images of universal destruction. Radio newscasters and newspaper articles and editorials compared Hiroshima with U.S. cities of similar size. Photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were transmuted into images of American cities in smoldering ruin.

This fear pervaded all levels of society, from Nobel laureates and government leaders to those who scarcely grasped what had happened but still sensed it as deeply menacing. The “strange disquiet” and “very great apprehension” the atomic bomb had aroused, wrote the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, were particularly intense among “the more sober and thoughtful sections of our nation.” “The 36-Hour War,” a November 1945 Life magazine article describing the nuclear annihilation of America’s cities, featured realistic drawings of a mushroom cloud rising over Washington and of the marble lions of the New York Public Library gazing sightlessly over the rubble of a demolished city.

Truman’s diary jottings of July 1945 also reveal a far more ambivalent view of science than he conveyed in his public proclamations—a view not of brilliant researchers unlocking the atom’s secrets for the ultimate benefit of mankind but of voracious termites burrowing into the planet
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with unpredictable but possibly catastrophic consequences. Here again, Truman’s response anticipated an important thread in the larger cultural reaction to the atomic bomb. Accompanying the post-Hiroshima praise for the scientific miracle workers who had accomplished this marvel was a strain of nagging apprehension about where science and its handmaiden technology were leading humankind. If, as Truman was boasting, the atomic bomb was “the greatest achievement of organized science in history,” wrote Dwight Macdonald in his journal politics a few days after Hiroshima, then “so much the worse for organized science.” It was grotesque, he suggested, to present this city-destroying machine as a giant leap forward in the march of science. Macdonald’s view of the Manhattan Project was closer to Truman’s private apprehensions than to the president’s expansive public pronouncements. For Macdonald, the horror of the atomic bomb was immeasurably deepened by the fact that it represented the end product of an elaborately bureaucratized project involving the uncoerced labor of 125,000 people, few of whom had the slightest idea what they were doing.

Macdonald expressed with particular vehemence one extreme of a deeply ambivalent set of public attitudes toward science in the early postwar period. Along with the idea of scientists as technological wonder-workers that Truman (publicly) insisted was the true meaning of Hiroshima, one also finds strong currents of fear, mistrust, and disillusionment. “Grave doubts are in many minds, and science is being regarded both with greater respect and with greater apprehension than ever before,” observed Scientific Monthly in September 1945.

Much evidence supports such assessments of the public mood. Newspaper editorials and letters to the editor, for example, reflected praise and fear of science in about equal proportions. “Science a Menace” and “Science Moving Too Fast” were the headlines of typical letters. A St. Louis Post-Dispatch editorial could simultaneously praise the scientific triumph and worry that it might end in human extinction. The very search for truth that was science’s “noblest attribute,” observed Raymond B. Fosdick, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation, in a November 1945 radio address, “has brought our civilization to the brink of destruction.” Should scientific research be curbed, Fosdick asked, or given free rein, with all the attendant social risks? That dilemma remains with us.
still, and Harry Truman, in the privacy of his diary, was already struggling with it before the rest of the world had even heard of the atomic bomb.

**The Contemplated Use of Atomic Weapons**

What postwar diplomatic and military uses, if any, were envisaged for what Bernard Baruch in 1946 called America's "winning weapon"? On this critical question, too, Truman vacillated in ways that reflected the larger uncertainty of the American people. In his post-Hiroshima public pronouncements, Truman always insisted that a fundamental objective of U.S. policy was to devise a system of international control that would end U.S. atomic supremacy, forestall a dangerous nuclear arms race, and ensure that the bomb would never again be used. The Acheson-Lilienthal plan of March 1946, to which historians have given much attention, was presented to the world as an expression of this high-minded objective.

At the same time, Truman was clearly prepared to gain whatever strategic advantage he could from the American atomic monopoly, which continued until September 1949, and the country's overwhelming atomic superiority, which lasted considerably longer. As he wrote jauntily to Bess from Potsdam on July 31, 1945, using a metaphor drawn from his favorite game: "I rather think Mr. Stalin is stallin' because he is not so happy over the English elections. [Clement Attlee had replaced Winston Churchill as prime minister.] He doesn't know it but I have an ace in the hole and another one showing—so unless he has threes or two pair (and I know he has not) we are sitting all right." As numerous studies have now demonstrated, all Truman's thinking and decision-making about nuclear weapons, from July 1945 through the end of his presidency, invariably reflected his preoccupation with the U.S.-Soviet power nexus.

As the Cold War worsened, did Truman ever envisage the atomic bomb not only as a diplomatic asset in his maneuverings with the Soviets but as something that actually might be used again? In various public pronouncements, as well as in occasional private communications within the government, Truman firmly rejected such an option. When army secretary Kenneth Royall urged a preemptive nuclear strike against the
Soviets during the 1948 Berlin blockade crisis, Truman made plain that he considered such an action not only unthinkable morally but appalling in its strategic and diplomatic shortsightedness: "You have got to understand that this isn't a military weapon. It is used to wipe out women and children and unarmed people, and not for military uses. You have got to understand that I have got to think about the effect of such a thing on international relations. This is no time to be juggling an atom bomb around."

When the Cold War turned hot in Korea, however, Truman himself toyed with the nuclear option. At a news conference on November 30, 1950, after the Chinese had crossed the Yalu River, Truman was asked about the possible use of the atomic bomb. He replied: "There has always been active consideration of its use. I don't want to see it used. It is a terrible weapon and it should not be used on innocent men, women, and children who have nothing whatever to do with this military aggression."

When the respected Merriman Smith of the United Press asked the president explicitly to confirm whether dropping the atomic bomb was, indeed, under "active consideration," he answered tersely: "Always has been. It is one of our weapons." When asked whether the targets being considered were civilian or military, he responded that this was a "matter that the military people have to decide. I'm not a military authority that passes on those things.... The military commander in the field will have charge of the use of weapons, as he always has."

The newspapers reported the story in banner headlines. A United Press bulletin proclaimed: "PRESIDENT TRUMAN SAID TODAY THE UNITED STATES HAS UNDER ACTIVE CONSIDERATION USE OF THE ATOMIC BOMB IN CONNECTION WITH THE WAR IN KOREA." An alarmed Prime Minister Attlee flew to Washington to dissuade the president from precipitate action.

In her biography of her father, Margaret Truman describes this episode as "all ridiculous, and very disheartening." It was, she writes, a classic example of journalistic distortion and sensationalism. Indeed, she implicitly blames the press's handling of this story for the fatal heart attack suffered a few days later by Truman's old friend and press secretary Charlie Ross. Yet when one reads Truman's clear answers to a series of clear questions, it is difficult to see how the reporters distorted or
misrepresented his views. Truman’s comments, while perhaps merely propaganda bluster, did clearly indicate that use of the atomic bomb in the Korean War, while deeply deplorable, was indeed under “active consideration” and that targeting decisions would be left to “the military commander in the field”—General Douglas MacArthur, who publicly advocated turning the Korean conflict into a war of destruction against Communist China.

In 1952, with his popularity sagging at home and the armistice talks bogged down at Panmunjom, Truman again considered the nuclear option, this time in the form of two memoranda that came to light years later (New York Times, August 3, 1980, p. 20). Evidently written to formulate hypothetical options as a way of clarifying his own thinking, they spell out in specific detail a nuclear ultimatum to the Soviets. The first, dated January 27, 1952, says:

It seems to me that the proper approach now would be an ultimatum with a 10-day expiration limit, informing Moscow that we intend to blockade the China coast from the Korean border to Indochina by means now in our control—and if there is further interference we shall eliminate any ports or cities necessary to accomplish our purposes.

This means all-out war. It means that Moscow, St. Petersburg, Mukden, Vladivostok, Peking, Shanghai, Port Arthur, Darien, Odessa, Stalingrad, and every manufacturing plant in China and the Soviet Union will be eliminated.

In the second of these two remarkable memos, written in May 1952, Truman actually drafted his ultimatum to “the Commies”: “Now do you want an end to hostilities in Korea or do you want China and Siberia destroyed? You may have one or the other; whichever you want, these lies of yours at this conference have gone far enough. You either accept our fair and just proposal or you will be completely destroyed.”

It is important to place these documents in context. Apart from the 1950 news conference mentioned above, Truman in his public pronouncements dismissed all talk of employing atomic weapons in the
Korean War. He had even recalled General MacArthur in April 1951 in part over MacArthur’s insistent calls for a wider war. And the Truman administration had firmly rejected NSC 100, the 1951 proposal by Stuart Symington (chairman of the National Security Resources Board) to the National Security Council calling for a nuclear attack on China and possibly the Soviet Union. In this context, historian Gregg Herken is probably correct in suggesting that Truman’s Rambo-like private musings are best seen as “more an expression of pique than of policy.” Yet in a nuclear age, even pique by a U.S. president cannot be dismissed lightly.

Clearly, Truman’s feelings about the military and diplomatic utility of the atomic bomb were ambivalent. He could readily state the compelling arguments against using the bomb (except when looking back on Hiroshima and Nagasaki), and he recognized the terrible dangers of nuclear threats and bluster. Yet when his frustration level rose high enough—whether against Stalin at Potsdam or the Communists in Korea—his thinking invariably circled back to the alluring option of resolving his frustrations once and for all with his ace in the hole.

In this respect, too, Truman’s ambivalence mirrored the attitudes of the American public: fearful of the bomb, aware of the horror of nuclear war, yet longing to translate the nation’s atomic supremacy into a decisive stroke against the new postwar enemy. Here it is important to note that, at least for some Americans, Truman’s ringing defense of the use of the atomic bomb against Japan had larger implications. If the bomb was justified against one enemy, they asked, why not against another? As one reader wrote the New Yorker after the publication of John Hersey’s Hiroshima in August 1946, “I read Hersey’s report. It was marvelous. Now let us drop a handful on Moscow.”

During the Korean War, a strong current of opinion emerged in favor of using the atomic bomb. In August 1950, a few weeks after the war began, 28 percent of Americans endorsed this option. When the Chinese entered the war in November, U.S. News & World Report noted a “wave of demand” for a nuclear response. A year later, as the conflict dragged on inconclusively, slightly more than half those polled by the Gallup organization supported dropping atomic bombs on “military targets.”

Although periodicals like the Saturday Evening Post warned that use of the atomic bomb in Korea would surely trigger World War III, others
discussed the matter quite coolly, as a viable option to be carefully weighed. *U.S. News & World Report*, for example, after a narrow tactical discussion that ignored any larger strategic (not to mention ethical) considerations, concluded in December 1950 that U.S. use of the bomb in Korea would probably be “sparing.” In “Advice to Joe” (1951), country-music star Roy Acuff warned the Russians that when Moscow lay in ashes they would regret their aggressions. “When the atomic bombs start falling,” the song rhetorically asked Stalin, “do you have a place to hide?”

Truman and the American people’s parallel patterns of response in their risky flirtation with the atomic bomb during the Korean War were only another manifestation of a congruence of outlook that had been evident for years. From the time he learned of the Alamogordo test in July 1945, Truman’s attitude toward the atomic bomb was a bundle of contradictions. He could express awe, fear, caution, bluster, or bravado, depending on his mood, his audience, and the circumstances of the moment. The very diversity and unpredictability of these reactions accurately mirrored the mood of the nation as a whole. Reacting to their political leaders, to the media, and to their own terrors and hopes, the American people displayed wide-ranging and sometimes quite contradictory responses as they struggled to come to terms with the endlessly ramifying implications of the news they had first heard from President Truman on August 6, 1945.

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Truman’s final and most complete comment on the atomic dilemma as president came in his State of the Union message delivered on January 7, 1953, nine weeks after the United States exploded the world’s first hydrogen bomb at Eniwetok atoll in the South Pacific. It was an exceptionally depressing appraisal:

Now we have entered the atomic age, and war has undergone a technological change which makes it a very different thing from what it used to be. War today between the Soviet Empire and the free nations might dig
the grave not only of our Stalinist opponents but of our own society, our world as well as theirs.

War's new meaning may not yet be grasped by all the peoples who would be its victims; nor, perhaps by all the rulers of the Kremlin. . . . The war of the future would be one in which man could extinguish millions of lives at one blow, demolish the great cities of the world, wipe out the cultural achievements of the past—and destroy the very structure of a civilization that has been slowly and painfully built up through hundreds of generations.

Such a war is not a possible policy for rational man. We know this, but we dare not assume that others would not yield to the temptation science is now placing in their hands.

Truman went on to insist that the United States had done everything in its power to avoid a nuclear arms race; the fault lay entirely with the Soviet Union. But beneath the Cold War rhetoric lay another theme: the inevitability of an upward spiral of nuclear menace rooted in the nature of science itself. "Science and technology have worked so fast" that mere presidents and premiers were helpless in the face of its inexorable advance:

The progress of scientific experiment has outrun our expectations. Atomic science is in the full tide of development; the unfolding of the innermost secrets of matter is uninterrupted and irresistible. Since Alamogordo we have developed atomic weapons with many times the explosive force of the early models, and we have produced them in substantial quantities. And recently in the thermonuclear test at Eniwetok, we have entered another stage in the world-shaking development of atomic energy. From now on, man moves in a new era of destructive power, capable of creating explosions of an order of magnitude dwarfing the mushroom clouds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
We have no reason to think that the stage we have now reached in the release of atomic energy will be the last. Indeed, the speed of our scientific and technical progress over the last 7 years shows no sign of abating. We are being hurried forward in our mastery of the atom, from one discovery to another, toward yet unforeseeable peaks of destructive energy. . . . It is no wonder that some people wish that we had never succeeded in splitting the atom.

Truman attempted to summon once more the soothing vision of the peaceful atom as "an instrumentality for human betterment," but his words rang hollow when compared to the bleak panorama of nuclear menace he had conjured up.

Absent from these valedictory passages is the aura of confidence and mastery usually so characteristic of the public Truman; muted is the reassuring image of a beneficent science. Other than stoic fortitude, Truman offered no advice or hints in his farewell message about how the nation might avoid the fate toward which an inexorable science was propelling it. The message was not only bleak but deeply passive and acquiescent in tone, as it described a fearful nuclear future that seemed destined to play itself out beyond human control. Harry Truman—and the American people—had come a long way since that exciting August afternoon aboard the USS Augusta, a little more than seven years before.