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CHAPTER 4

The Decision to Drop the Bomb

The decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan, unquestionably one of the most momentous made by Americans during World War II and probably the most controversial, ironically was in many ways a nondecision: that is, the use of the bomb was integral to the decision to build it, the assumption being that the atomic bomb would be employed when ready if it was necessary to win or end the war. Although some critics have charged that racism played an important role in the decision to use the bomb against Japan and that it would never have been used against white Europeans, there is overwhelming consensus among historians that it would have been used against Germany had it been necessary to defeat the Nazis and end the war in Europe.¹ After all, before developing the atomic bomb, the United States used massed waves of heavy bombers, the most destructive force in its arsenal, against Germany. It also used incendiary weapons against German cities, albeit on a smaller scale than against Japanese urban areas. More to the point, the Manhattan Project was undertaken as a response to the German threat. President Roosevelt had made it clear that he was prepared to employ the bomb against Germany, and the original orders for training airmen to drop the bomb applied to Germany as well as Japan. By the fall of 1944, Germany no longer was a likely target, since it was increasingly clear that the Nazis would be defeated before the Manhattan Project could produce any atomic bombs. Still, in his memoirs, General Groves recalled that as late as De-

cember 1944, President Roosevelt told him, in Stimson's presence, that if the war in Europe was not over before the first atomic bombs were ready, the military should be prepared to use them against Germany. Therefore, in August 1945, when the news of Hiroshima reached a defeated and occupied Germany and some Germans were heard to say, "Thank God this came after we had been defeated and not before," they were right to feel lucky, in terms of both American intent and the sequence of events that spared Germany from sharing Japan's fate.²

As regards Japan, between the end of 1944 and August 6, 1945, nothing of sufficient significance occurred to cause the American leadership—and the British, whose approval was required by agreement—to reevaluate the assumption in place from the start that the atomic bomb would be used if it was needed to end the war.³ Instead, events by degrees reinforced that assumption and ultimately turned it into a final decision. In particular, American policy makers saw no sign they considered credible that Japan was prepared to surrender on terms acceptable to the Allies. To the contrary, what they saw was Japanese resistance intensifying as the battlefield approached the home islands. On the American side, morale among troops slated to invade Japan was low, and war weariness was spreading on the home front, especially as civilians learned of the staggering casualty figures from the battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

It is worth noting that the atomic bomb was not the only weapon originally developed for use against Germany but employed only against Japan. Before Japan was hit by atomic weapons, it was attacked for months by another new high-tech weapon developed at about the same time and at a similar cost (although brought to completion more quickly) with the German threat in mind but never used against the Third Reich: the B-29 Superfortress bomber. The development of the B-29 resulted in large part from the anticipated need to defend the United States against Nazi Germany if the Germans succeeded in overrunning Europe. That objective and the ultimate goal of carrying the war to Germany required a new long-range bomber, which turned out to be the B-29. The B-29, the development and production of more than three thousand of which actually cost more than the Manhattan Project, entered combat in mid-1944 and started bombing Japan from bases in the Mariana Islands in November. The first incendiary raids against Japanese cities took place in late February 1945, and the devastating attack on Tokyo that killed an estimated eighty thousand people took place in early March. The only plane in the American arsenal capable of delivering a load as massive as an atomic bomb, the B-29 therefore became the delivery system that brought those bombs from the American base on the tiny island of Tinian in the Marianas to the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.⁴

Two other considerations led to the use of the atomic bomb. First, the United States and its allies were committed to a policy of unconditional surrender. That

policy officially dated from the Casablanca Conference in January 1943 between Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill but had roots reaching back to the early days of the war. It was based on the conviction that both Nazism and Japanese militarism had to be uprooted in order to provide for a permanent postwar peace.⁵ That meant that Germany and Japan would have to be totally defeated so that the Allies could occupy both countries and implement in each a thorough program of reform. The memory of World War I loomed darkly over American policy makers as they looked to the end of the current war. As one State Department analyst put it well before Casablanca, "We are fighting this war because we did not have unconditional surrender at the end of the last one."⁶ The policy of unconditional surrender was controversial, and to some extent remains so, because of the belief in some quarters that Japan might have been willing to accept surrender before August 1945 had it been offered less onerous terms, in particular a clearly stated commitment to allow the emperor to remain on his throne. Others argue in response that there is no evidence whatsoever that such a commitment prior to the use of the atomic bomb would have brought about a Japanese surrender because the gap between minimum Allied demands and conditions acceptable to the men who controlled Japan was far too wide to bridge with that simple formula.

Second, the bomb was never viewed as certain to bring about an immediate Japanese surrender by itself. Rather, it became part of the mix to increase pressure on the Japanese government to the breaking point. Before July 1945, that mix included continuing the policy of bombardment and blockade on one hand and planning for an invasion of the Japanese homeland on the other. There was disagreement within the American military about those options, in particular whether bombardment and blockade alone could end the war within a reasonable time frame and how great the cost in lives would be in an invasion of Japan. Some top-level Navy and Army Air Forces officers (an independent air force was not established until after the war) believed that the United States could end the war through bombardment and blockade. However, General Marshall and the Army were convinced that only an invasion would force Japan's surrender within an acceptable period, and on May 25, 1945, the Joint Chiefs of Staff endorsed the first stage of a proposed two-stage plan to invade Japan. That plan actually combined all the available options: blockade and bombardment would continue until the projected invasion date of November 1, 1945⁷ (see Documents B6 and B7). Another important factor in the Joint Chiefs' considerations was the promise made by the Soviet Union at the Yalta conference of February 1945, which at the time still had a neutrality pact with Japan, to scrap that agreement and enter the war against Japan three months after Germany's defeat. Soviet participation was considered vital, inasmuch as it would tie up Japanese forces in Manchuria

that otherwise might be deployed to defend against the American invasion of Kyushu.

The question before June 1945 was what President Truman would decide to do. He had to make his decision in the wake of dreadful casualty totals in the battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, falling morale in the military as soldiers contemplated what awaited them when they invaded Japan's home islands, and pressure on the home front to end the war as quickly as possible without further massive losses.⁸ Truman endorsed Operation Olympic, the first stage of the planned invasion of Japan, at a meeting with top advisors on June 18. A month later, the successful test of the plutonium bomb took place, and hopes rose that its use, in tandem with the other pressures on Japan, could force surrender. Interestingly, when the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not bring about an immediate unconditional surrender, General Marshall began thinking of using atomic bombs tactically in support of the upcoming invasion to wipe out Japanese beach defenses.⁹

FROM ROOSEVELT TO TRUMAN

As already noted, by the fall of 1944 Germany no longer was a likely target of atomic bombs. That left Japan, and in September 1944 Roosevelt and Churchill secretly agreed that when a bomb became available, "it might perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese, who should be warned that this bombardment will be repeated until they surrender"¹⁰ (see Document A6). In December, a special Air Force unit called the 509th Composite Group, commanded by Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, began training at a base in Utah to drop what its men were told with deliberate vagueness was a special bomb. On April 16, 1945, four days after he was inaugurated as president following Roosevelt's death, Harry Truman confirmed the American commitment to unconditional surrender in his first speech to Congress as commander in chief. He restated that position in a press conference in early May. Significantly, Truman, even as vice president, had only a general idea regarding what the Manhattan Project was building. Within a day of assuming the presidency he was given additional sketchy information by James Byrnes, formerly the director of the Office of War Mobilization, and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson before receiving a full briefing from Stimson and General Groves on April 25¹¹ (see Documents A10 and A11). On Stimson's recommendation, Truman approved the formation of what the secretary of war called a "select committee of particular qualifications" to make recommendations for both wartime and postwar atomic policy¹² (see Document A11). Called the Interim Committee, it included Stimson as

chairman and Byrnes among its eight members. The committee added to its ranks an advisory scientific panel composed of Oppenheimer, Fermi, E. O. Lawrence, and Arthur Compton. Two days later, another committee charged with only immediate concerns, the Target Committee, met for the first time under the chairmanship of Brigadier General Thomas F. Farrell, Groves's deputy at the Manhattan Project. The Target Committee included two Air Force officers, General Farrell, and five scientists. Its job was to come up with four possible targets that could be attacked with atomic weapons between July and September.¹³

While matters relating to the bomb obviously were of crucial importance, Truman had plenty of other urgent concerns requiring his immediate attention. The battle for Okinawa had begun on April 1 and had turned into yet another bloody quagmire, with casualty reports growing worse by the day. Truman also had to deal with unresolved and urgent diplomatic issues such as tensions with the Soviet Union related to the approaching end of the war in Europe and the formation of the United Nations. Domestic concerns, including getting his administration organized and preparing a budget for the next fiscal year, also demanded presidential attention. Meanwhile, work continued on building the bomb and planning for its use.

THE INTERIM COMMITTEE

It was the Interim Committee, in meetings on May 31 and June 1, 1945, that undertook the next significant discussions about the atomic bomb. Marshall and Groves attended both meetings by invitation. Once again, the underlying assumption was that these weapons would be used when they became available. As Arthur Compton later recalled, "it seemed to be a foregone conclusion that the bomb would be used. It was regarding only the details of strategy and tactics that differing views were expressed."¹⁴ The meeting on May 31 covered a variety of matters. The participants discussed future development of atomic weapons, including the certainty that a thermonuclear fusion bomb, far more powerful than any fission bomb, could be built. The discussion of the Soviet Union yielded an interesting willingness in some circles to trust Stalin when Oppenheimer opined that "we might open up this subject with them in a tentative fashion and in the most general terms" and Marshall suggested two Soviet scientists be invited to witness the first atomic test, ideas immediately rejected by Byrnes. An important conversation among those present that was not recorded in the minutes because it took place during lunch concerned a possible demonstration of the new weapon before using it to attack a Japanese city. The idea ran up against the fears that the test might be a dud, which would be a disaster; that the

Japanese, who obviously would have to be told of the site of the demonstration, might stop it by bringing American prisoners there; or that the Japanese might shoot down the American plane carrying the bomb. When the meeting resumed, Oppenheimer touched briefly on the psychological impact of the bomb, in particular, how aside from its destructive force, its visual effect—"a brilliant luminescence which would rise to a height of 10,000 to 20,000 feet"—might undermine Japan's will to fight. This emphasis on the "shock value" of the bomb as a means of bringing about a Japanese surrender would be central in the thinking of several American strategists, including Marshall and Stimson. After further discussion, Stimson summed up what he considered the committee's conclusions: Japan would not be warned; the United States would not "concentrate" on a civilian area but nonetheless try "to make a profound psychological impression on as many . . . inhabitants as possible"; and that the "most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses"¹⁵ (see Document A15).

The June 1 meeting again included Marshall and Groves, as well as four "invited industrialists," whose expertise was sought mainly on a number of postwar issues. The "use of the bomb" was not discussed until the afternoon, after the departure of the industrialists and Stimson, with Byrnes in the chair. Aside from affirming the discussion of the day before, the committee agreed that the final selection of a target was "essentially a military decision" and that the bomb "should be used against Japan as soon as possible"¹⁶ (see Document A17). Byrnes then informed Truman of the committee's conclusions.

Not everyone involved in the Manhattan Project believed the bomb should be used, especially not without further investigating other possible options. Some prominent scientists working at the Metallurgical Laboratory (Met Lab), concerned that a postwar nuclear arms race could lead to a war that would destroy civilization and encouraged by Leo Szilard, formed a committee to urge that the bomb not be used against Japan. The committee of seven, chaired by physical chemist and Nobel Laureate James Franck, issued its appeal on June 11. Having warned of a potentially catastrophic arms race, the Franck Report called for a demonstration of the "new weapon" before representatives of the United Nations "on a desert or barren island." The bomb could then "perhaps" be used if necessary, with the approval of the United Nations and the American public, "perhaps after a preliminary ultimatum to Japan to surrender or at least to evacuate certain regions as an alternative to their total destruction." These sentiments were echoed a month later in a petition circulated by Szilard and signed by sixty-eight Met Lab scientists¹⁷ (see Documents A23 and A38). The Franck Report in turn became a matter for discussion by the Interim Committee's Scientific Panel. On June 16, Robert Oppenheimer, speaking for the panel, reported its members did not believe a "technical demonstration" would have the

necessary effect on Japan and that therefore “we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use”¹⁸ (see Document A24).

MATTERS OF DIPLOMACY

By June, discussions on the use of the bomb increasingly were entangled with two other pressing issues: Truman’s upcoming conference with Stalin and Churchill at Potsdam, which had a wide-ranging agenda, from postwar arrangements and problems in Europe to the proposed Soviet role in the war against Japan, and the final decision whether to go ahead with the invasion of Japan. The president’s conversation with Stimson on June 6 dealt with the Potsdam Conference. Relations between the United States and Britain on one hand and the Soviet Union on the other had been deteriorating since the Yalta conference of February 1945, mainly because the Soviets were imposing Communist-dominated governments on Poland and other Eastern European countries occupied by their armies. In his first diplomatic venture as president, a meeting on April 23 with Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov, Truman had been exceedingly blunt about American concerns, with no noticeable results. The president quickly changed tactics. In May, after Germany’s surrender, he sent Harry Hopkins, who had been one of Roosevelt’s most trusted aides, to Moscow to smooth things over with Stalin. Hopkins’s assignment included solidifying the Soviet promise to enter the war against Japan and to propose a “Big Three” (Truman, Churchill, Stalin) conference to deal with a variety of urgent issues.

By the time of his June 6 meeting with Stimson, Truman was satisfied that Hopkins had been successful. Still, the question of how and when to deal with the Soviets regarding the bomb remained a concern. Stimson told Truman that the Interim Committee had concluded “there should be no revelation to Russia or any one else of our work on S-1 until the first bomb had been successfully laid on Japan.” Although he knew that the Soviets, through their spies, were aware of the Manhattan Project, Stimson did not want the subject of the bomb to come up and complicate the difficult negotiations expected at Potsdam. At the same time, progress at Los Alamos was relevant to the conference. Truman, in concert with the leaders of Britain and China, was planning to issue a surrender ultimatum to Japan; preparation of that ultimatum, led by Stimson, began in late June. (The Soviet Union would not participate in the proposed ultimatum because it was not at war with Japan.) Since it took at least three months to produce enough U235 to make a single bomb, the only way to have an arsenal of atomic weapons available during 1945 was to build plutonium bombs, which could be built at the rate of three a month because plutonium could be produced more quickly than U235. A plutonium bomb test before Potsdam would influence the content of

the surrender ultimatum. Stimson therefore was pleased when Truman said that the conference would not begin until July 15 (it actually began on July 17), for there presumably would be time for a test. The test also was important because it would give Truman a gauge of the need for Soviet participation in the invasion of Japan, and therefore how much he would have to concede to the Soviets in return for their help. As it turned out, the plutonium bomb test did not take place until July 16, nine days after Truman departed the United States on his journey to Potsdam¹⁹ (see Documents A20, A32, and A34).

DOWNFALL AND THE MEETING OF JUNE 18

On June 18, 1945, Truman met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his top civilian advisors to decide about Downfall, the overall American plan to invade Japan. Downfall actually was a two-stage plan: Olympic, the first stage, called for the seizure of the southern third of the island of Kyushu beginning in November 1945; it would be followed in March 1946 by Coronet, the assault against the Tokyo region. Downfall involved what Truman called his “hardest decision to date,” one that would require “all the facts”²⁰ (see Document A25). Of course, one vital fact was unavailable: whether the United States would have atomic bombs to use against Japan. In any event, as the June 14 memo from Admiral Leahy calling the meeting made clear, Truman was concerned above all else with American casualties and intended to decide future policy “with the purpose of economizing to the maximum extent possible in the loss of American lives”²¹ (see Document A26).

Truman had called the meeting in the first place because of a memo he had recently received from former president Herbert Hoover, which urged that the Allies offer terms to Japan that in effect amounted to a negotiated peace. Hoover’s main reason for recommending lenient terms was that he feared it might cost between 500,000 and one million American lives to defeat Japan²² (see Document A19). Marshall’s staff dismissed the estimate as being far too high, but at the June 18 meeting Marshall was unwilling to give Truman a specific estimate in its place. The best the Army Chief of Staff was willing to do was to provide a chart of losses in previous battles and in the ongoing battle on Okinawa, adding that he believed that losses during the “first thirty days in Kyushu should not exceed the price we have paid for Luzon”—which added up to 31,000 dead, wounded and missing. However, even that number revealed less than met the eye. Each entry on Marshall’s chart ended with a ratio of American casualties to Japanese “killed and prisoners.” While these ratios fluctuated from battle to battle, the unavoidable conclusion for everyone present was that since considerably more troops on both sides would be fighting on Kyushu than on

Luzon, the upcoming battle was likely to be a bloodier affair for Americans and Japanese alike (see Document A27). Nor did Marshall indicate how far beyond thirty days he thought the Kyushu campaign would last. The main dissent from this low-end estimate came from Admiral Leahy, who opposed the invasion. He suggested that any casualty estimate for Kyushu be based on the casualty rate suffered by U.S. troops on Okinawa, which he placed at 35 percent. A few minutes later Marshall offered that the total assault force for Olympic would be 766,700 troops. Although no one present openly did the math, Leahy's casualty percentage for Okinawa and Marshall's assault force numbers for Olympic pointed to a huge casualty total for the invasion of Kyushu (268,000), far higher than anything suggested by Marshall's vague formulations. In any event, Truman approved Olympic, although the casualty issue clearly still concerned him, as graphically indicated by his later comment that he "hoped that there was a possibility of preventing an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other." He pointedly withheld approval of Coronet, yet another indication of his concern about casualties. After covering several other topics, the minutes for the meeting cryptically record, "The President and the Chiefs of Staff discussed certain other matters," a reference to the atomic bomb.²³ Exactly what was said is uncertain, but if the conversation concerned how atomic weapons would affect the invasion plans, it can only have been speculative since none had yet been produced or tested.

THE POTSDAM CONFERENCE, MAGIC AND ULTRA, AND THE POTSDAM DECLARATION

Harry Truman's first major venture into international diplomacy was a contentious conference. In Stephen Ambrose's apt summation, "Sniping and jabbing were the hallmarks of Potsdam."²⁴ Before the sniping began, however, Truman received notice on the evening of July 16 of the successful Trinity test. The next day brought more good news when Stalin agreed to enter the war against Japan by August 15. Subsequent reports on the power of the plutonium bomb, including a report from General Groves, lifted Truman's spirits and may have sharpened his negotiating style with Stalin after a series of difficult meetings. Still, Truman was frustrated by the expanded Soviet demands on China. Therefore, shortly after receiving Groves's report he asked Stimson if Marshall believed that the projected Soviet attack on Japan's army in Manchuria was still needed to support the American invasion of Kyushu, a line of inquiry he quickly dropped²⁵ (see Documents A36 and A39).

Intelligence reports during late June and July that painted a grim picture of Japanese intentions highlighted the need for Soviet entry into the Pacific War.

Two of the most valuable sources of intelligence were top-secret American code-breaking operations. The United States had cracked the Japanese diplomatic code before the war began, and the White House was receiving daily summaries of radio communications to and from Tokyo called the Magic Diplomatic Summaries (MAGIC). Even more important, U.S. codebreakers had cracked the Japanese army's code in 1943 and by 1944 were able to provide a wealth of information from its decrypted radio messages. This operation was known as ULTRA. (The Japanese navy code was deciphered sufficiently to provide valuable information by 1942.) By mid-July the evidence from MAGIC and ULTRA paralleled and reinforced each other. The most significant MAGIC intercepts were of cables between Japan's Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo and Naotake Sato, Tokyo's capable ambassador to the Soviet Union. Throughout the exchanges, of which President Truman was kept informed, Togo urged Sato to seek Soviet mediation to achieve a negotiated peace. With regard to unconditional surrender, Togo stressed on July 17 that Tokyo would not consider "anything like an unconditional surrender." Four days later, in response to Sato's suggestion that Japan consider a modified form of unconditional surrender that would preserve Japan's "national structure," Togo cabled that "we are unable to consent to it [unconditional surrender] under any circumstances whatever"²⁶ (see Documents C8, C9, C10). Meanwhile ULTRA was tracking a massive military buildup and reinforcement effort on Kyushu that by the end of July had reached proportions far beyond what the top military planners had expected when Truman approved Olympic at the June 18 meeting. Among other things, that buildup rendered obsolete the casualty estimates Marshall had given Truman at that meeting. As in the case of MAGIC, Truman was kept informed regarding ULTRA intelligence revelations.²⁷

The decision to use the atomic bomb now moved to its conclusion. On July 24, Truman received and approved a plan prepared for General Arnold "for initial attacks using special bombs." Hiroshima and Nagasaki topped the list of four cities, which also included Kokura and Niigata. The significant omission was Kyoto, spared at Stimson's insistence. Kyoto's status as Japan's most important cultural center, Stimson had argued, meant that its destruction would create enormous bitterness in Japan that would make reconciliation in the postwar era much more difficult. Shortly after 10:00 a.m. on July 25, Truman met with Marshall to review the overall military situation in the Far East. Finally, on July 25, 1945, an order went out to General Spaatz, commander of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific, authorizing the 509th Composite Group to "deliver its first special bomb as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945." The order was issued on Spaatz's insistence. He had understood that the bomb was going to be used but demanded a written order, what he called a "piece of paper," before he was willing to use the new weapon. His order, signed

by General Thomas T. Handy, Marshall's deputy, noted that it was sent "with the approval of the Secretary of War and of the Chief of Staff, USA"²⁸ (see Documents B18 and B19).

That left Japan a matter of days—Hiroshima ultimately was attacked on August 6—and one last chance to avoid a nuclear catastrophe. On July 26, the United States, Britain (which had formally given its approval to use the atomic bomb on July 4), and China issued the Potsdam Declaration. That declaration was the product of long debate about how to craft an ultimatum most likely to produce surrender. Stimson and former ambassador to Tokyo and undersecretary of state Joseph Grew had been among those urging the Allies to provide for retention of the emperor, on the theory that this was of crucial importance to the Japanese and therefore would increase the chance that they would respond positively. Winston Churchill agreed. It is crucial, however, to keep in mind that this formulation, as Stimson and Grew understood it, still meant that Japan's system of government would be fundamentally changed from an authoritarian regime in which power was held by a tiny circle of people and the emperor was considered divine to a Western-style constitutional monarchy in which the emperor would be reduced to a figurehead. This was totally unacceptable not only to Hirohito and the military men who controlled the government but also to anyone with influence in Japan. In the opposing camp were former Secretary of State Cordell Hull, current Secretary of State James Byrnes, and other influential State Department officials. Hull believed that it was too early to modify unconditional surrender and risk Japanese rejection of the new terms. It was better to wait until Japan had been further weakened by continued Allied bombing and Soviet entry into the war.

The Potsdam Declaration, issued on July 26, reflected the views of Byrnes and Hull. It began by warning Japan that its armed forces had to surrender unconditionally or the country would face "prompt and utter destruction." It stated that Japan's government would be completely overhauled, the influence of those who had planned and carried out the war would be eliminated, and that Japan's ability to make war would be destroyed. At the same time, it provided certain guarantees, as part of what the document called "our terms," not given the Germans, who had surrendered without any conditions whatsoever. Among them were that Japan would not be destroyed as a nation, its economy would be allowed to recover, the occupation would be temporary, and Japan's future government, which would be democratic, would be established "in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people"²⁹ (see Document A45).

On July 28, Japan rejected the Potsdam Declaration. At a news conference, Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki used the word *mokusatsu*, which is usually translated as "to kill with silence," to indicate how his government planned to respond to the proclamation. There are other possible translations, including "take no

notice of," "treat with silent contempt," and, most benignly, "ignore," but Truman probably was not far from the truth when he observed, "They told me to go to hell, words to that effect."³⁰ Nothing now stood between Japan and the American atomic bombs except the technical problems of delivering them to their targets.