

The Decision to Drop the Bomb

by Abbie Carrier

The dropping of the atomic bomb on two Japanese cities could arguably be the most controversial decision made in the history of the United States. Although the development of an atomic bomb was started under Franklin D. Roosevelt, he would not live long enough to make that decision himself. Harry S. Truman was the president tasked with ending the war in Europe and the Pacific. It was under his leadership that the United States of America gained a place in history as the only country to use the atomic bomb. While the decision and justification process is not a common area of study for this chapter in American history, there is usually only a small chapter dedicated to it in books about the bomb, it is the one with the most variance. Historians take into account different variables when discussing how and why the United States made the decision it made, and they focus on different variables when discussing the justifications used to drop the bomb. In the last four decades the interpretation of how the decision was made, and the justification for it, has slowly evolved. As the decades have passed less emphasis has been placed on Truman himself and more on the actions and influences of those around him, from the Japanese, to his advisors, to his predecessor Roosevelt.

Michael Amrine's 1959 book *The Great Decision* is the only one that credits the decision directly to Truman, quoting Truman as saying "let there be no mistake about it. I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt it should be used."¹ Although the want for total surrender and an unwillingness to negotiate with Japan is mentioned, Amrine makes the argument that the decision was within complete control of the president.² He stated that as long as America had seen some willingness from Japan to surrender, the "American high command could still stop the 'infernal machine,'" but America did have to take some sort of action after sending

¹ Michael Amrine, *The Great Decision: The Secret History of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), 165.

² *Ibid.*, 198.

out declarations warning of “prompt and utter destruction.” Because of a lack of specifics in the threat, the United States could have taken any action, but it was Truman who decided to drop the bomb.³ Truman, at that point, had decided that “there was no alternative.”⁴ The weakness of this argument comes from the date it was written. Published in 1959, it was written less than ten years after the war ended; government documents are still classified at that time. Amrine would not have had the access to information that other later historians would have. His narrow focus supports the idea that he might be looking at a smaller picture than some of the other books being looked at.

While Amrine mentions the United States hope for total surrender from Japan, he does not mention it as a major factor in the decision, unlike Herbert Feis in the book *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*, published in 1966. Feis introduces the idea of the bomb being justified because of the potential to save American lives, he focuses more on Japan’s unwillingness to surrender saying that the country was “angry at the defiant, crazed, useless prolongation of the ordeal. The Japanese government had rejected reasonable conditions of peace.”⁵ This was seen as justification to bring the war to a quick end and “to save the lives of Americans.”⁶ Unlike Amrine, whose focus is solely Truman; Feis does not mention the President, despite the fact that as Commander-In-Chief, he would have final say in the decision.

Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan Witts’ 1977 book *Enola Gay* elaborates on the ideas of Feis’ book, and adds a new element to the discussion. It builds on the idea that the bomb was dropped to save the lives of some American soldiers, but introduces the thought that Japan needed to completely surrender because of “atrocities against American prisoners of war.”⁷ This book is also when the interpretation of the decision and justification seem to shift away from Truman, and towards advisors. Truman formed a panel to “advise [him] on all aspects of atomic energy.”⁸ Thomas and Witts state that the panel believed Truman was going to say yes because he stated that he would do as he believed Roosevelt would have done, and therefore focused mainly on giving him information that would cement this

³ Ibid., 191.

⁴ Ibid., 198.

⁵ Herbert Feis, *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 120.

⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁷ Gordon Thomas & Max Morgan Witts, *Enola Gay* (Briardcliffe Manor: Stein and Day, 1977), 109.

⁸ Ibid., 125.

decision.⁹ While the justification of the bombing holds steady with what was seen in earlier books, the idea of Truman as the main decision maker is slowly starting to be replaced.

Richard B. Frank's *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* extends this idea even further by taking the decision process all the way back to Roosevelt stating that "Truman's decision was one of noninterference—basically, a decision to not upset existing plans" that "any notion that these policy makers agonized over the question of use or that Truman made a personal and lonely decision to use the bomb misconstrues the decision process."¹⁰ Truman had asked for an estimate of casualties if the United States were to continue with its Island Hopping plan and while numbers were gathered, it is difficult to get an estimate like that so the report that did end up on Truman's desk had gone through a number of revisions.¹¹ The justification of the bomb was still cited as being able to save lives, but Franks says that the decision was made long before Truman became president, that the "unanimous sanctions of his principal advisors on the issue" all of which had been similar to the sanctions and information shown to Roosevelt, led to no reexamination of the issue and plans had gone along as they had been planned.¹²

Wilson D. Miscamble's 2011 book *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan* gives a bigger picture of all the main players. By this point in time, there seems to be an agreement between historians that the justification for using the bomb was to save American lives. He states that although the desire was to do what Roosevelt would have done, and his advisors supported the use of the bomb, Truman is, at the end of the day, the one whose presidency is linked to the usage. Miscamble says "Truman's 'decision' ultimately was... the negative one of not interfering in a course already charted and powerfully driven... Yet, one must acknowledge that Truman possessed neither the capacity nor the desire to question the logic of the bomb's use."¹³ Historians throughout the decades had been attributing the decision to other sources because Truman was not an active part of a decision process had been going on for so long, but Miscamble disagrees with that assertion. He does concede that Truman did have some doubts about the bomb, but by not acting on, or making those

⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁰ Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 135.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹² *Ibid.*, 257.

¹³ Wilson D. Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bomb, and the Defeat of Japan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 45.

doubts aware, Truman is just as responsible as those who actively pushed for usage, and even more so because the dropping of the bomb could not have happened without his consent.¹⁴

The arguments of these sources seem to begin and end at the same point with the first and the last source stating that the decision was at least partially made by Truman, but as time went on, other factors were taken into account. Truman is not seen as the only decision maker in the history books anymore, Historians are taking into account the influences around him. As more documents and information are released every day, with government declassification, and war veterans still telling their stories, more accurate pictures are coming out about the war, but this is an intensely secret subject. The only people who knew what the decision and justification process was like have all passed away now, and while some of their personal notes have been released, many of these sources had excerpts from Truman's own, a full and complete picture of the days leading up to August 6, 1945 may never be achieved.

¹⁴ Ibid., 100.