

— The Man Who Knows Tells of: —

The Decision to Use The Atomic Bomb

In the following article Henry L. Stimson gives a clinical account of the birth of the atomic age—specifically the story of the creation of the atom bomb and the reason for its use against Japan. The article appears in Harper's Magazine for February and is reprinted by permission of Harper's. Mr. Stimson was Secretary of War from 1911 to 1913, Secretary of State from 1929 to 1933, and Secretary of War from 1940 to 1945 and was the man who made the recommendation to the President to use the bomb.

BY *Henry L. Stimson*

IN RECENT months there has been much comment about the decision to use atomic bombs in attacks on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This decision was one of the gravest



Henry L. Stimson

made by our Government in recent years, and it is entirely proper that it should be widely discussed. I have therefore decided to record for all who may be interested in my understanding of the events which led up to the attack on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, on Nagasaki on August 9, and the Japanese decision to surrender, on August 10. No single individual can hope to know exactly what took place in the minds of all of those who had a share in these events, but what follows is an exact description of our thoughts and actions as I find them in the records and in my clear recollection.

**Plans and Preparations
September, 1941—June, 1945**

It was in the fall of 1941 that the ques-

tion of atomic energy was first brought directly to my attention. At that time President Roosevelt appointed a committee consisting of Vice President Wallace, General Marshall, Dr. Vannevar Bush, Dr. James B. Conant, and myself. The function of this committee was to advise the President on questions of policy relating to the study of nuclear fission which was then proceeding both in this country and in Great Britain. For nearly four years thereafter I was directly connected with all major decisions of policy on the development and use of atomic energy, and from May 1, 1943, until my resignation as Secretary of War on September 21, 1945, I was directly responsible to the President for the administration of the entire undertaking; my chief advisers in this period were General Marshall, Dr. Bush, Dr. Conant, and Maj. Gen. Leslie R. Groves, the officer in charge of the project. At the same time I was the President's senior adviser on the military employment of atomic energy.

The policy adopted and steadily pursued by President Roosevelt and his advisers was a simple one. It was to spare no effort in securing the earliest possible successful development of an atomic weapon. The reasons for this policy were equally simple. The original exper-

A-Bombs Dropped on Japan All U. S. Had

Former Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson disclosed yesterday that the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945, were the only two the United States had ready at the time.

Stimson also disclosed in an article in Harper's Magazine that military leaders were convinced that unless atomic bombs were used, major fighting would not end before the latter part of 1946 "at the earliest" with an anticipated cost of over one million casualties to American forces alone.

imental achievement of atomic fission had occurred in Germany in 1938, and it was known that the Germans had continued their experiments. In 1941 and 1942 they were believed to be ahead of us, and it was vital that they should not be the first to bring atomic weapons into the field of battle. Furthermore, if we should be the first to develop the weapon, we should have a great new instrument for shortening the war and minimizing destruction. At no time, from 1941 to 1945, did I ever hear it suggested by the President, or by any other responsible member of the Government, that atomic energy should not be used in the war. All of us, of course, understood the terrible responsibility involved in our attempt to unlock the doors of such a devastating weapon; President Roosevelt particularly spoke to me many times of his own awareness of the catastrophic potentialities of our work. But we were at war, and the work must be done. I therefore emphasize that it was our common objective, throughout the war, to be the first to produce an atomic weapon and use it. The possible atomic weapon was considered to be a new and tremendously powerful explosive, as legitimate as any other of the deadly explosive weapons of modern war. The entire purpose was the production of a military weapon; on no other ground could the wartime expenditure of so much time and money have been justified. The exact circumstances in which that weapon might be used were unknown to any of us until the middle of 1945, and when that time came, as we shall presently see, the military use of atomic energy was connected with larger questions of national policy.

THE EXTRAORDINARY story of the successful development of the atomic bomb has been well told elsewhere. As time went on it became clear that the weapon would not be available in time for use in the European theater, and the war against Germany was successfully ended by the use of what are now called conventional means. But in the spring of 1945 it became evident that the climax of our prolonged atomic effort was at hand. By the nature of atomic chain reactions, it was impossible to state with certainty that we had succeeded until a bomb had actually exploded in a full-scale experiment; nevertheless it was considered exceedingly probable that we should by midsummer have successfully detonated the first atomic bomb. This was to be done at the Alamogordo Reservation in New Mexico. It was thus time for detailed consideration of our future plans. What had begun as a well-founded hope was not developing into a reality.

On March 15, 1945, I had my last talk with President Roosevelt. My diary record of this conversation gives a fairly clear picture of the state of our thinking at that time. I have removed the name of the distinguished public servant who was fearful lest the Manhattan (atomic) project be "a lemon"; it was an opinion common among those not fully informed.

"The President . . . had suggested that I come over to lunch today . . . First I took up with him a memorandum which he sent to me from —, who had been alarmed at the rumors of extravagance in the Manhattan project. — suggested that it might become disastrous and he suggested that we get a body of "outside" scientists to pass upon the project because rumors are going around that Vannevar Bush and Jim Conant have sold the President a lemon on the subject and ought to be

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