CHAPTER 8

HARRY S. TRUMAN

(1884-1972)

THE MOST IMPORTANT ETHICAL DECISION EVER?

WHAT HARRY CONFIDED

There are those who thought it must have been the most difficult ethical decision within recorded history. Others have said that it was the most important for civilization.

Why?

In 1945 President Harry S. Truman had to decide whether or not to drop the first atomic bomb. He had been warned by his Secretary of War that nuclear weapons, if developed, used, and propagated, had the capacity to destroy civilization, if not life itself.

Moreover, once one country used nuclear weapons, others would develop them for self-protection or supremacy. Opening the nuclear door was in fact opening Pandora's Box.

But many historians have said, just as Truman said publicly, that the decision to use the atomic bomb was not difficult and was all but straightforward. By some accounts Truman had no choice other than to use atomic bombs if he wanted to end World War II. He could save many thousands of lives, if not millions, by closing the door on the boxes of two other Pandoras—Adolf Hitler and the Japanese Emperor Hirohito. Reportedly, Truman felt that by taking the nuclear path he could prevent global empires dominated by such barbarous despots. Dropping the devastating bombs was thus the lesser of two evils.

But was what he said publicly also what he thought privately?

What was his real thinking and how was the decision made? Was his dominant ethical concern about opening the door on an unknown but potentially devastating nuclear poison? Or closing the lid on fascism's coffin? Or something else which went unreported?

Behind the scenes, Truman had confided to family that the harrowing choice was not what he had told the public. Three years after his decision, Harry wrote to his sister Mary, "I ordered the atomic bomb to be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was a terrible decision."

His daughter Margaret wrote in a biography that "the impression that some people have that my father made a snap decision to use the bomb could not be further from the truth." She noted that in June, 1945, "Dad had been wrestling with the atom bomb … almost continuously since his April conference with Secretary of War Stimson."

Many within Truman's circle had pointed out that no one really knew if the bomb would work. Others were uncertain of the degree of damage it would inflict.

Before making any decisions the President requested a complete report from his operations director, General Leslie Groves. Like FDR before him, this president relied upon inner circles of experts to consider both the military and humanitarian aspects of employing a thunderbolt.

Leading scientists such as Berkeley's Robert Oppenheimer and Harvard's president James Conant, not to mention Nobel Prize winners, had advised former president Roosevelt, Secretary Stimson, and Truman. Many others from the military, government, and even England's prime minister, Winston Churchill, gave input before a decision was made.

Given that so many experts were involved, why the controversy? What did Truman really think? Was he opening or closing Pandora's box? Or was he opening one box while closing another? Was this really the toughest ethical decision ever made? Or the most important? What really happened?

As with any intriguing homicide, the most interesting question might be that of motive. And with any great ethical case study, the related question must be: "What was most at stake?" Which of these values—human dignity, survival, national security, freedom, human rights, America's image, life itself, Truman's self-image and career—were the most important?

WHY MANHATTAN?

An important part of the atomic bomb story began six years earlier in August, 1939, while FDR was president. That year, the great physicist Albert Einstein departed Germany, concerned about the increasing power of the Nazis and their persecution of Jews and all political opposition.

After relocating to the United States at Princeton University, Einstein communicated to others that the Nazis had the ability to develop an extremely powerful "atomic" bomb. Soon the renowned physicist wrote President Roosevelt, Truman's predecessor, a letter warning that the Germans could develop such a weapon *first* unless other countries took the initiative.

Such information, confirmed by other scientists, catalyzed President Roosevelt into action. FDR felt he must create such a weapon before Hitler's scientists did if the second great war were to be won by the Allies.

So, that same year FDR and his secretary of war began to convene a team of military leaders and scientists who would initiate a top-secret operation. What came to be known as the Manhattan Project (since the original project headquarters was in New York City) would cost over two million dollars.

Eventually the clandestine project would employ over 125,000 people, primarily in three facilities in remote parts of New Mexico (Los Alamos), Tennessee (Oak Ridge), and the state of Washington (Hanford). Later a fourth area was required, Tinium Island, fifteen hundred miles south of Japan, so that a special bombing crew could learn how to load and deliver the enormous bombs.

By 1942, with the input of leading scientists and advisors, Roosevelt had chosen General Leslie Groves to head the project. Groves in turn selected physicist Robert Oppenheimer to choose and coordinate a team of top scientists from Princeton, Berkeley, California Institute of Technology, and elsewhere, whom he persuaded to move to the "off limits" laboratories at Los Alamos, New Mexico.

Despite his role as vice president, Truman knew virtually nothing about the Manhattan Project until he assumed the presidency himself after Roosevelt's death in April, 1945. Suddenly, the new president was privy to top secret information and dependent upon Secretary of War Stimson, General Groves, and Dr. Oppenheimer, among others, for guidance about "Manhattan."

Despite the questions of conscience he reported to his family, Truman shared Roosevelt's longing to out-step Hitler at every turn. From that standpoint he, like FDR, gave Groves and Oppenheimer a "full speed ahead" green light to do whatever was necessary to develop a "knock-out punch" to the Germans and Japanese.

The nuclear plants in Tennessee, Washington, and New Mexico continued to work non-stop to (1) develop enough suitable uranium and plutonium, (2) design multiple forms of bomb architecture, (3) solve problems such as ensuring that the bomber plane would not be destroyed by the a-bomb's radiation, and (4) discover how their own employees could be shielded at work.

By the time Truman assumed the presidency, the Allies were winning the war in Europe against Hitler. However, the new president also felt an urgency about defeating the Japanese. Truman had discovered that Hirohito's troops never surrendered, even when conquered, and they were also brutally killing and torturing American prisoners of war (POWs).

The war in the Pacific seemed destined to continue forever at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. So, the development of an "apex weapon," which would bring closure to years of slaughter, was more than appealing.

A RED, FLASHING LIGHT

However, there seemed to be a number of shadows surrounding the advent of a nuclear arsenal. On May 24, 1945, just one month after Truman assumed office, Secretary of War Stimson brought the president a letter from a concerned engineer, O.C. Brewster. The engineer urged the president to stop production of an atomic bomb due to the "tragedy of unrestrained competitive production of this material." Brewster had foreseen the specter of a global nuclear arms race.

Stimson himself was concerned that they might be "creating a Frankenstein." He cautioned the president: "We do not wish to outdo Hitler in atrocities."

Moreover, Oppenheimer had made it clear that there were conflicting moral views among the physicists themselves. One of his Los Alamos scientists, Joseph Rotblat, had already abandoned the project when he learned that the a-bomb was no longer needed to stop Hitler. Since the Fürher's empire was collapsing, Rotblat felt that there was no further motivation to develop a bomb before the Germans did.

Another top physicist at Los Alamos, Robert Wilson, began to convene scientists to consider the ethical and humanitarian concerns that nuclear potential had uncorked. Yet another leading physicist, Nobel Laureate James Franks, was concerned that the atomic bomb could not only spark an arms race, but that it might defy international regulations and prejudice the world against any country that stooped to deploy it.

The very man who had first envisioned a nuclear chain reaction in 1933, Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard, had tried to meet with Truman to voice similar humanitarian concerns. Szilard was referred to the incoming secretary of state, James Byrnes, and met with him without success, although Brynes said he would convey Szilard's perspective to the president.

Unconvinced that Brynes would help, Szilard later drafted a letter directly to the president urging nuclear restraint. The letter was eventually co-signed by 155 scientists working within the Manhattan Project.

Although Truman would not see the co-signed letter until after the bombing of Hiroshima, he was aware that leading scientists such as Szilard, Wilson, Franck, and Nobel genius Neils Bohr were gravely anxious about pushing

"Humpty Dumpty" off the wall. Such a devastating action would be irreversible.

Among the scientists' concerns were that (1) unleashed nuclear development would lead to "another form of holocaust," (2) there could be multiple annihilations of entire cities, (3) civilians, including children, within each city would be unwarned and burned alive, and (4) the United States' moral leadership in the world would plummet.

Opposition to "the bomb" was not merely from scientists. Initially, General George C. Marshall, chief of staff of the Army, felt reluctant and cautioned that there must at least be advance warning if such a bomb were to be used. Marshall would later go on to become secretary of defense, ambassador, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Another general whom Truman greatly trusted, Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower, felt that such a bomb would be too devastating. Ike argued that the Japanese would soon surrender, in any event. General Curtis LeMay, who was leading the charge in the Pacific, agreed with Eisenhower.

Truman's overall military chief of staff, Admiral Leahy, was also opposed to the bomb although he proffered a different rationale. Leahy was convinced that the bomb would "never work." Indeed it had never been tested or used before and the technical, economic, and scientific hurdles facing "Manhattan" seemed formidable.

Nevertheless, the "go team"—Stimson, Graves, Oppenheimer, and others in their advisory councils—functioned as an opposing vector. What FDR had set in motion was backed by millions of dollars, thousands of workers, and dozens of experts. Despite the many shadows and the voices calling for restraint, the project accrued momentum.

COMPETING MORAL ARGUMENTS

As we have seen before, at the core of a great ethical dilemma reside substantial arguments and counter-arguments pulling the decision maker in opposite directions. While the humanitarian and "beware an arms race" arguments comprised one such vector against nuclear weapons, Truman was also well aware of strong, counter-balancing moral arguments in favor of nuclear deployment.

For example, how could he or the U.S. government be drafting millions of young men and sending them into harm's way without providing them their greatest possible protection? Could he in good conscience say to the parents of young military "boys" and POWs whom he had drafted that "I had the bomb

but never used it?" Could the American government say to those who were literally dying to protect them (or us) that Japanese lives were more important than American ones?

Should the people who authored the slaughter at Pearl Harbor be spared while thousands more neighborhood boys were mercilessly killed, maimed, and tortured? Truman had seen young men who left America looking like All-American athletes return home burned beyond recognition, mentally deranged with shell shock, bearing multiple amputations, and no longer able to identify their families. Could he ignore the disabling and disfiguring harm inflicted upon his "brave sons?" A strong moral argument was made for the prevention of home slaughter and the protection of those protecting America.

What Truman knew, but could never mention to the press or the public, was his distrust of the Russians. What if they developed the bomb first? Communism was feared nearly as much as fascism.

Truman's classified information revealed that the Manhattan Project had been infiltrated by Russian informers. Indeed, even Oppenheimer, despite his wealth, cultured background, and academic credentials (Harvard, Cambridge, Berkeley, and Cal Tech), looked suspicious to the FBI: "Oppie" and one of his girlfriends had been loosely associated with left wing groups some years earlier.

Fear and distrust circulated in high places. What if there were critical information leaks? What if another tyrant, Russian leader Joseph Stalin, who was just as bloodthirsty as Hitler and Hirohito, was already developing the bomb? Harry Truman was deeply concerned about who would have nuclear supremacy after, and not just during, the war. Dropping the bomb would send a message from the U.S. to the Soviets, not just to the Japanese.

Other arguments were advanced in favor of nuclear development. Would not the presence of nuclear weapons serve as a deterrent to future world wars? Who would possibly risk war if there were atomic weapons on both sides? Could not nuclear power potentially generate electricity and be employed in other positive ways?

There was also the reality that the Japanese seemed determined to fight to the last man standing. Various American generals and War Department officials had estimated that the United States might lose anywhere from 100,000 to 700,000 more troops while the Japanese doggedly held onto every inch of home soil. And many Russian troops would also be at risk, since Russia was expected to declare war upon Japan within days.

Meanwhile, American and other prisoners of war were being starved to death, tortured, and burnt alive by Japanese army officers. Every day there were reports and letters about POW's who were beheaded, wounded, and mentally abused.

A perpetual stream of U.S. casualties were flown back to military bases for amputations, emergency surgery, and treatment for mental disorders. Many would never fully recover… nor would their parents, spouses, or children. Almost everyone Truman knew had relatives, often sons, grandsons, or nephews, at risk. Many of these soldiers had grief-stricken or fearful wives and children of their own.

Female casualties, although fewer by comparison, were tragically on the rise. The Army WACs, Navy WAVES, and Air Force WASPs, not to mention nurses and support personnel within all of the war theaters, were reported missing, severely wounded, and killed each month.

The anxious and grief-stricken letters from parents and spouses who had heard or feared the worst were numerous and heart-wrenching. Truman read these with a lump in his throat. How could the president sleep at night with these casualties, both real and pending, on his conscience?

Then there were the economic factors. Ultimately, over two billion dollars would be invested in nuclear development and related salaries and activities. For Roosevelt, it was only two million during the early days of the Manhattan Project. Truman knew that FDR would have used the bomb in a minute if only to show that he had "not wasted two million of our tax payers' dollars." What would the public say about a far larger sum?

Nor did Truman want Japan to have any lingering power after the war. Since 1931 Japan had been ravaging Asia. During that time, they had slaughtered one hundred and fifty times the number of people who would later perish in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan had proven to be an horrific imperialist invader that left a crimson trail of slaughter, pillage, rape, and abuse behind it.

Since Japan had never been defeated, their leaders carried an aura of invincibility and a self-righteous, supposedly divine mandate to dominate others. Thus, in the eyes of the Allies, the Japanese, no less than the Third Reich, would be an ongoing threat to world peace and stability if they were not completely annihilated.

Unlike the many hated wars throughout history, World War II was a "popular war" to rid the world of evil, invasive tyrants and genocide. Did not such ends justify such means? Should not barbarians themselves be barbequed? Shouldn't they be shocked into submission by the ultimate force, since no other approach had worked?

These were strong arguments for unleashing the beast of atomic weaponry. But the arguments against were also extremely compelling.

THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

Despite the full force of these arguments, the real costs of nuclear initiatives could not be measured in dollars or even in lives. The clairvoyants and visionaries predicted a world in which there would be a new type of "nuclear family," one that included terrorists, tyrants, and "crazies" who would steal or bake homemade nuclear weapons and start the last world war. Even a small group of "safe" countries, each armed with the bomb, could prove perilous. And what if rogue agents, psychopaths, or militants seeking genocide or revenge, could not be defused by the James Bonds of the world?

Truman knew that any decision would be irreversible. Once the United States dropped a bomb, he would not have the moral authority to say that other countries could not do so.

Moreover, such weapons could create a climate of fear—fear of Armageddon, of military control over science, of communist dominance, of an unending arms race, of destruction of the environment, of nuclear leaks and accidents, and of widespread annihilation.

After the first atomic bomb was dropped, the Japanese would protest that America had violated articles 22 and 23 of the Hague Convention by using "cruel weapons." Thus, the a-bomb was not only unethical in the eyes of many, but was illegal according to international agreements. However, the question of breaking human laws was not the only one posed by the situation: to millions of religious believers there was also the question of breaking God's or nature's laws. Scientists had long been accused of playing God by tampering with the natural world. In this case, the proof of violating nature was that all Hell would break lose.

Essentially, physicists were reverse engineering what a greater engineer—God—had created, and many believers felt that certainly there would be a price to pay. Even many atheists felt that tampering with the laws of nature was imprudent, if not forbidden, by nature itself.

Nuclear arms would also change the tone of human affairs. Author Felix Morley spoke of a lowering of human standards, the abolition of spirituality and peace, and the advent of what he labeled "a return to nothingness." Symbolically, such "nothingness bombs" would become indiscriminate killers such that nothing would survive.

Due to their enormous footprint, or blast range, these weapons could not distinguish between military targets and the thousands of civilians, including children, who surrounded them miles away. Their aggregate use resembled genocide if not omnicide.

Indeed, no one could have anticipated the bombs' actual impact. After the bombing of Hiroshima, the measurable results were far greater than had been anticipated. The first bomb generated a heat of approximately 300,000 degrees Fahrenheit at the explosion epicenter. The resulting heat on the earth's surface would have initially measured about 5,400 degrees. It is estimated that over 80,000 people were killed within one half second, just as if they had been hurled into the sun itself. Thousands more—including children—burned to death in a few seconds or minutes, or gradually perished from radiation poison. Over 70,000 structures were destroyed, including every building within a two mile radius of the core explosion. Only a fraction of these were military targets, and 80% of the victims were civilians. The blast was equivalent to 20,000 tons of dynamite, not the 1,000 tons originally reported to Truman and Stimson.

Eyewitness accounts reported survivors whose burnt flesh was barely hanging from their muscles and bones. Some were trying to push their intestines back into their bodies while others staggered slowly and painfully, like zombies. Heads and other body parts were everywhere. All survivors resembled the homeless in search of some source of healing, food, drink, and orientation.

Photos of people with their faces melted away, without ears, and burnt beyond recognition confirmed survivor tales. Hospitals working with exhausted skeleton crews and no electricity or plumbing were filled with twitching bodies, vomit, feces, and urine. The few surviving, overwhelmed doctors were mystified by patients who wandered into hospitals with "Disease X" some weeks following the bombing. Curiously, X-victims looked unburned on the outside, yet they would soon collapse from internal erosion due to radiation poisoning. For this disease there was no cure, nor were the exhausted, over-taxed doctors and nurses immune to the afterglow of radiation.

When making his decision, Truman had not been advised of the nature and extent of such desecration. Nor could he have been informed, since only a handful of scientists knew what radiation poisoning was like, and none knew it would be unleashed with such potency and scale.

Likewise, the president was unaware that Hiroshima was far more than just a military target, although it was indeed a communication and distribution center for the Japanese army. Truman was never told that the bomb's impact would be primarily upon civilians, who would suffer in unprecedented numbers and ways.

Those who had briefed both Truman and Stimson had greatly underestimated the clout and treachery of their "young Frankenstein." But, they had told him enough to cause him to later share with his family that it was a difficult and dreaded decision.

A LONG PARADE OF OBSTACLES

In addition to moral cross-currents, Truman, FDR, and the Project faced many practical and interpersonal hurdles in developing nuclear research. There had been the academic politics surrounding which scientists and labs—Princeton, Columbia, Chicago, Berkeley, etc.—would be selected and involved? Among the elite scientists who were recruited, many were Nobel laureates and *prima donnas* whom Oppenheim (who had not won the Nobel) would have to manage and appease. Convincing such scientists to be sequestered at top-secret, remote facilities without comfort and travel was not always easy or possible. And since nuclear physics was a new field with few experts, their staff and equipment operators would often need to be fully trained on the job.

No one could be fully trusted. General Groves learned to compartmentalize knowledge such that staff knew only about their own small pieces of the puzzle. Intelligence was gathered about questionable staffers. It was impossible to know who might secretly be talking with Groves' intelligence core, or with the FBI, or with the Germans, Japanese, or Russians. Innumerable codes, pseudonyms, and disinformation campaigns had to be employed at Oak Ridge and other hands-on sites, which added to the consternation and confusion of many.

Moreover, testing such a bomb was not without its own challenges. Beyond the possibility that it would be a dud were the questions of where and how such tests could be conducted locally without detection and without irreparable harm to people and nature. Nor could the unknown short and long-term effects of "dirty molecules" circulating in the atmosphere be predicted.

All in all, Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, and the Project, faced many unknowns, speed bumps, pressures, and counter-pressures. An ethical case study in which a choice between Hirohito's and Hitler's holocaust on the one hand, and the hastening of a world-scale nuclear holocaust on the other, may indeed be a candidate for the most important decision human leaders have ever made.

But was it the most difficult?

THE FINAL CHAIN REACTION

At the core of unleashing nuclear power is a process called a chain reaction. A series of linked (hence the word "chain") events are each caused by the one preceding it, and then each causes the one which follows… like a row of falling dominoes.