

The History You Should Know: A Historic Countdown to the US Nuclear Attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Hiroshima and Nagasaki

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Global Research, August 06, 2016

Region: [East Asia, Japan](#)

In-depth Report: [Military of Japan](#)

The following is a compilation of articles that create a historical countdown from [Pressing Issues](#) which looks at the behind the scene events of the days leading to the US nuclear attacks on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively on August 6 and August 9, 1945. Examining the nuclear attacks on Japan, it is worth quoting General Eisenhower that “the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn’t necessary to hit them with that awful thing.”

Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, Asia-Pacific Research Editor, 6 August 2016.

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Author’s Note

*Each summer I count down the days to the atomic bombing of Japan (August 6 and August 9, 1945), marking events from the same day in 1945. I’ve been doing it here for more than two weeks now. I’ve written three books and ebooks on the subject: *Hiroshima in America* (with Robert Jay Lifton), [Atomic Cover-Up](#) (on the decades-long suppression of shocking film shot in the atomic cities by the U.S. military), and [Hollywood Bomb](#) (the wild story of how an MGM 1947 epic was censored by the military and Truman himself).*

The Nuclear Countdown

July 30, 1945:

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of U.S. troops in Europe, has visited President Truman in Germany, and would recall what happened in his memoir (*Mandate for Change*): “Secretary of War Stimson, visiting my headquarters in Germany, informed me that our government was preparing to drop an atomic bomb on Japan. I was one of those who felt that there were a number of cogent reasons to question the wisdom of such an act...

“During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives. It was my belief that Japan was, at that very moment, seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of ‘face’. The Secretary was deeply perturbed by my

attitude...”

In a *Newsweek* interview, Ike would add: “...the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn’t necessary to hit them with that awful thing.”

— Stimson, now back at the Pentagon, cabled Truman, that he had drafted a statement for the president that would follow the first use of the new weapon—and Truman must urgently review it because the bomb could be used as early as August 1. Stimson sent one of his aides to Germany with two copies of the statement. The Top Secret, six-page typed statement opened: “ ___ hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on _____ and destroyed its usefulness to the enemy. That bomb has more power than 20,000 tons of TNT.... It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe.” Later, as we will see, the claim that Hiroshima was merely “a military base” was added to the draft.

—After scientists sifted more data from the July 16 Trinity test of the first weapon, Gen. Leslie R. Groves, military head of the Manhattan Project provided Gen. George Marshall, our top commander, with more detail on the destructive power of atomic weapons. Amazingly, despite the new evidence, Groves recommended that troops could move into the “immediate explosion area” within a half hour” (and, indeed, in future bomb tests soldiers would march under the mushroom clouds and receive harmful doses of radiation). Groves also provided the schedule for the delivery of the weapons: By the end of November more than ten weapons would be available, in the event the war had continued.

—Groves faced a new problem, however. Gen. “Tooe” Spaatz on Guam urgently cabled that sources suggested that there was an Allied prisoner of war camp in Nagasaki just a mile north of the center of the city. Should it remain on the target list?” Groves, who had already dropped Kyoto from the list after Stimson had protested, refused to shift. In another cable Spaatz revealed that there were no POW camps in Hiroshima, or so they believed. This firmed up Groves’s position that Hiroshima should “be given top priority,” weather permitting. As it turned out, POWs died in both cities from the bombing.

July 31, 1945:

—In Germany, Admiral William D. Leahy, chief of staff to Truman—and the highest-ranking U.S. military officer during the war—continues to privately express doubts about the bomb, that it may not work and is not needed, in any case. (Gen. Eisenhower [had just come out against](#) using the Bomb.) Leahy would later write in his memoirs:

“It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons.

“The lethal possibilities of atomic warfare in the future are frightening. My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children.”

—The assembly of Little Boy is completed. It is ready for use the next day. But a typhoon approaching Japan will likely prevent launching an attack. Several days might be required for weather to clear.

-Secretary of War Stimson sends semi-final draft of statement for Truman to read when first bomb used and he has to explain its use, and the entire bomb project, to the U.S. and the world, with this cover note: "Attached are two copies of the revised statement which has been prepared for release by you as soon as the new weapon is used. This is the statement about which I cabled you last night. The reason for the haste is that I was informed only yesterday that, weather permitting, it is likely that the weapon will be used as early as August 1st, Pacific Ocean Time, which as you know is a good many hours ahead of Washington time."

It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.

August 1, 1945:

—Truman wrote a letter to his wife Bess last night talking about the atomic bomb (but without revealing it): "He [Stalin] 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."

And today he gives a letter to Stalin, which confounds the Soviet leader. Earlier, Stalin had promised to declare war on Japan around August 7. Now Truman writes that more consultation is needed. Truman had earlier pushed for the quick entry, writing in his diary "fini Japs" when that occurred, even without use of The Bomb. Now that he has the bomb in his "pocket" he apparently hopes to stall the Soviets.

-Truman has also approved statement on the use of the bomb, brought to him last night in Germany by a courier, drafted by Secretary of War Stimson and others, and ordered it released after the bomb drop. A line near the start has been added explicitly depicting the vast city of Hiroshima (occupied mainly by women and children) as nothing but a "military base." The president, and the drafters of the statement, knew was false. An earlier draft described the city of Nagasaki as a "naval base" and nothing more. There would be no reference to radiation effects whatsoever in the statement—it was just a vastly bigger bomb.

—The Potsdam conference ended early this morning, with Truman expected to head back to the US by sea tomorrow.

—The "Little Boy" atomic bomb is now ready for use on the island of Tinian. Under the direction of the lead pilot, Paul Tibbetts, practice runs have been completed, near Iwo Jima, and fake payloads dropped, with success. Truman's order had given the okay for the first mission later this day and it might have happened if a typhoon was not approaching Japan.

—Stimson writes in his diary about decision today to release to the press, with Truman's coming statement after the use of the bomb, a 200-page report on the building of the bomb, revised to not give too much away. Here he explains why they will release it at all: "The aim of the paper is to backfire reckless statements by independent scientists after the demonstration of the bomb. If we could be sure that these could be controlled and avoided, all of us would much prefer not to issue such a paper. But under the circumstances of the entire independence of action of scientists and the certainty that there would be a

tremendous amount of excitement and reckless statement, [Gen. Leslie] Groves, who is a very conservative man, had reached the conclusion that the lesser evil would be for us to make a statement carefully prepared so as not to give away anything vital and thus try to take the stage away from the others.”

August 2, 1945

—Early today, Paul Tibbets, pilot of the lead plane, the *Enola Gay* (named after his mom) on the first mission, reported to Gen. Curtis LeMay’s Air Force headquarters on Guam. LeMay told him the “primary” was still Hiroshima. Bombardier Thomas Ferebee pointed on a map what the aiming point for the bomb would be—a distinctive T-shaped bridge in the center of the city, not the local army base. “It’s the most perfect aiming I’ve seen in the whole damned war,” Tibbets said. But the main idea was to set the bomb off over the center of the city, which rests in kind of a bowl, so that the surrounding hills would supply a “focusing effect” that would lead to added destruction and loss of life in city mainly filled by women and children.

—By 3 p.m., top secret orders were being circulated for Special Bombing Mission #13, now set for August 6, when the weather would clear. The first alternate to Hiroshima was Kokura. The second, Nagasaki. The order called for only “visual bombing,” not radar, so the weather had to be okay. Six planes would take part. Two would escort the *Enola Gay*, one would take photos, the other would be a kind of mobile lab, dropping canisters to send back scientific information.

—Meanwhile, three B-29s arrived at Tinian carrying from Los Alamos the bomb assemblies for the second Fat Man device (which would use plutonium, the substance of choice for the future, unlike the uranium bomb meant for Hiroshima).

—Japanese cables and other message intercepted by the United States showed that they were still trying to enlist the Soviets’ help in presenting surrender terms—they would even send an envoy—but were undecided on just what to propose. The Russians, meanwhile, were just five days from declaring war on Japan.

—Top U.S. officials were now centering on allowing the Japanese to keep their emperor when they give up. In his diary Secretary of War Stimson endorses a key report which concludes: “*The retention of the Emperor will probably insure the immediate surrender of all Japanese Forces outside the home islands.*” Would offering that win a swift Japanese surrender—without the need to use the bomb? Not considered.

—Six years ago earlier on this day, August 2, 1939, Albert Einstein sent a letter to President Roosevelt stating the Germans were trying to enrich uranium 235—and that this process would allow them to build an atomic bomb. This helped spark FDR’s decision to create the Manhattan Project.

August 3, 1945

—On Tinian, Little Boy is ready to go, awaiting word on weather, with General LeMay to make the call. Taking off the night of August 5 appears most likely scenario.

—On board the ship *Augusta* steaming home for USA after Potsdam meeting, President Truman, Joint Chiefs chairman Admiral Leahy, and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes—a strong A-bomb booster—enjoy some poker. Byrnes aide Walter Brown notes in his diary that

“President, Leahy, JFB [Byrnes) agreed Japan looking for peace. (Leahy had another report from Pacific.) President afraid they will sue for peace through Russia instead of some country like Sweden.”

-Leahy had questioned the decision to use the bomb, later writing: “[T]he use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender.... [I]n being the first to use it, we...adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children.”

-Our “Magic” intercepts show Japan monitoring the Soviets’ military buildup in the Far East (prelude to the declaration of war in four days). Also, Japanese still searching for way to approach Molotov to pursue possible surrender terms before that happens. Another Magic intercept carried the heading, “Japanese Army’s interest in peace negotiations.” War Department intel analysts revealed “the first statement to appear in the traffic that the Japanese Army is interested in the effort to end the war with Soviet assistance.” A segment of Prime Minister Togo’s message declared: “The Premier and the leaders of the Army are now concentrating all their attention on this one point.”

John McCloy, then assistant secretary of war and a well-known “hawk” in his later career, would later reflect, “I have always felt that if, in our ultimatum to the Japanese government issued from Potsdam [in July 1945], we had referred to the retention of the emperor as a constitutional monarch and had made some reference to the reasonable accessibility of raw materials to the future Japanese government, it would have been accepted. Indeed, I believe that even in the form it was delivered, there was some disposition on the part of the Japanese to give it favorable consideration. When the war was over I arrived at this conclusion after talking with a number of Japanese officials who had been closely associated with the decision of the then Japanese government, to reject the ultimatum, as it was presented. I believe we missed the opportunity of effecting a Japanese surrender, completely satisfactory to us, without the necessity of dropping the bombs.”

-Soviet General Vasilevskii reports to Stalin that Soviet forces ready for invasion from August 7 on.

August 4, 1945:

—On Tinian, Little Boy is ready to go, awaiting word on weather, with General LeMay to make the call. With the weather clearing near Hiroshima, still the primary target, taking off the night of August 5 appears the most likely scenario. Secretary of War Stimson writes of a “troubled” day due to the uncertain weather, adding: “The S-1 operation was postponed from Friday night [August 3] until Saturday night and then again Saturday night until Sunday.”

—Hiroshima remains the primary target, with Kokura #2 and Nagasaki third.

—Paul Tibbets, pilot of the lead plane, the *Enola Gay*, finally briefs others in the 509th Composite Group who will take part in the mission at 3 pm. Military police seal the building. Tibbets reveals that they will drop immensely powerful bombs, but the nature of the weapons are not revealed, only that it is “something new in the history of warfare.” When weaponeer Deke Parsons says, “We think it will knock out almost everything within a three-

mile radius," the audience gasps.

Then he tries to show a film clip of the recent Trinity test—but the projector starts shredding the film. Parsons adds, "No one knows exactly what will happen when the bomb is dropped from the air," and he distributes welder's glasses for the men to wear. But he does not relate any warnings about radioactivity or order them not to fly through the mushroom cloud.

—On board the ship *Augusta* steaming home for the USA after the Potsdam meeting, President Truman relaxes and plays poker with one of the bomb drop's biggest booster, Secretary of State Jimmy Byrnes. Truman's order to use the bomb had simply stated that it could be used any time after August 1 so he had nothing to do but watch and wait. The order included the directive to use a second bomb, as well, without a built-in pause to gauge the results of the first and the Japanese response—even though the Japanese were expected, by Truman and others, to push surrender feelers, even without the bomb, with Russia's entry into the war on August 7. Hence: assembly-line massacre in Nagasaki.

—Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who directed the U.S. war in the Pacific, and would soon become the head of our occupation of Japan, had still not been told of the existence and planned use of the new bomb. Norman Cousins, the famed author and magazine editor, who was an aide to MacArthur, would later reveal: "MacArthur's views about the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were starkly different from what the general public supposed....When I asked General MacArthur about the decision to drop the bomb, I was surprised to learn he had not even been consulted. What, I asked, would his advice have been? He replied that he saw no military justification for the dropping of the bomb. The war might have ended weeks earlier, he said, if the United States had agreed, as it later did anyway, to the retention of the institution of the emperor." As we noted earlier, both [General Eisenhower](#) and Truman's top aide, Admiral Leahy, both protested the use of the bomb against Japan in advance.

August 5, 1945:

—Pilot Paul Tibbets formally named the lead plane in the mission, #82, after his mother, *Enola Gay*. A B-29 that would take photos on the mission would be named *Necessary Evil*.

—Also on Tinian, Little Boy is ready to go, awaiting word on weather, with General Curtis LeMay to make the call. At 3:30 p.m., in an air-conditioned bomb assembly hut, the five-ton bomb is loaded (gently) on to a trailer. Crew members scribbled words onto the bomb in crayon, including off-color greetings for the Japanese. Pulled by a tractor, accompanied by a convoy of jeeps and other vehicles, the new weapon arrives at the North Field and is lowered into the bomb pit.

—The bomb is still not armed. The man who would do, before takeoff, according to plan, was Parsons. But he had other ideas, fearing that the extra-heavy B-29 might crash on takeoff and taking with it "half the island." He asked if he could arm the bomb in flight, and spent a few hours—on a hot and muggy August day—practicing before getting the okay.

—Pilot Tibbets tries to nap, without much success. Then, in the assembly hall just before midnight, he tells the crew, that the new bomb was "very powerful" but he did not mention the words "nuclear," "atomic" or "radiation." He calls forward a Protestant chaplain who

delivers a prayer he'd written for this occasion on the back of an envelope. It asks God to "to be with those who brave the heights of Thy heaven and who carry the battle to our enemies."

—Hiroshima remains the primary target, with Kokura #2 and Nagasaki third. The aiming point was directly over the city, not the military base or industrial quarter, guaranteeing the deaths of tens of thousands of women and children.

— The Soviets are two days from declaring war on Japan and marching across Manchuria. Recall that Truman had just written in diary "Fini Japs" when the Soviets would declare war, even without the Bomb. ([See new evidence](#) that it was the Soviet declaration of war, more than the atomic bombing, that was the decisive factor in Japan's surrender.)

—Halfway around the world from Tinian, on board the ship *Augusta* steaming home for the USA after the Potsdam meeting, President Truman relaxes. Truman's order to use the bomb had simply stated that it could be used any time after August 1 so he had nothing to do but watch and wait. The order included the directive to use a second bomb, as well, without a built-in pause to gauge the results of the first and the Japanese response—even though the Japanese were expected, by Truman and others, to push surrender feelers, even without the bomb, with Russia's entry into the war on August 7.

To see the original entries please click here:

[Countdown to Hiroshima: X-Minus 7 Days](#)

[Countdown to Hiroshima: X-Minus 6 Days](#)

[Countdown to Hiroshima, X-Minus 5 Days](#)

[Countdown to Hiroshima: X-Minus 4 Days](#)

[Countdown to Hiroshima: X-Minus 3 Days](#)

[Countdown to Hiroshima: X-Minus 2 Days](#)

[Countdown to Hiroshima: X-Minus 1 Day](#)

Greg Mitchell is the author of more than a dozen books, with three on the use of the bomb, including Atomic Cover-Up (on the decades-long suppression of shocking film shot in the atomic cities by the U.S. military) and Hollywood Bomb (the wild story of how an MGM 1947 drama was censored by the military and Truman himself).

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