

Measuring the Fallout of Truman's Decision

In recent discussions of Truman's decision to use the atomic bombs on Japan, a controversial issue has been whether, stated simply, he should have done this or not. On the one hand, some argue that Truman was justified in his actions, that this was a military, not a moral act, and the decision was in the best interests of America and the world. On the other hand, however, others argue that he knew his actions would adversely affect America's political and social relationships, as well as the health of untold millions, and history has proven this to be true. Given our current situation with the War on Terrorism and recent events in the Middle East, especially Iran's nuclear program, Truman's decision has created echoes that are nearly as devastating today as they were August, 1945.



No president or world leader faced such a challenge as Truman did during WWII. Fighting a second world war on two fronts was complicated, and bringing the war to a swift end in the Pacific made a good deal of sense after Germany surrendered. Yet, while Stimson (19__), Churchill, and others encouraged Truman to use the atomic bombs to end the war and save lives, their perspective didn't account for the fact that over 100,000 Japanese lives would be lost to radiation poisoning and cancer. There was adequate evidence that Japan was ready to surrender (Grew) and that the hasty appeal Truman offered wasn't

well received by the Japanese (McCoy). As this political cartoon shows, the public was not fully in support of Stimson's position.

More importantly, Truman's intent was to employ the atomic bomb. Truman, in his memoirs, described how he explained news of the bomb to sailors around him: "This is the greatest thing in history." Indeed, it was great. But the definition of "great" allows for different interpretations. Yes, this event was large, and notable, especially as a military tool. However, I think that he ~~is mistaken because he~~ overlooked another definition: "remarkable in magnitude, degree, or effectiveness." Being known for greatness in war should also be related to compassion; discretion is, indeed, the better part of valor. Truman knew that dropping the bomb would be a demonstration of American power, and his own political motivations hindered his ability to make a rational decision.

From a modern perspective, as a citizen in 2012, there are a number of additional historical incidents that demonstrate the long-lasting effects of Truman's poor decision. Moreover, scientists predicted that using the bomb would encourage other countries to try and build their own bomb more rapidly. Also, his military advisors also knew that this would launch a nuclear arms race (__). Some could argue that the nuclear arms race would have happened

anyway, but not to the same degree. Consequently, the next few decades resulted in the cold war

Currently, America finds itself on the brink of another nuclear stand-off with Iran. As reported in the New York Times:

“[Iran] wants international recognition that it has the right to enrich uranium for what it claims are peaceful purposes. Western powers say they suspect Iran’s intentions are to produce fuel for nuclear weapons...” (NYtimes.com, 6/19/12)

Because Truman employed nuclear energy as a weapon of war, America and other Western powers have continued to look upon any non-Western country’s interest in nuclear power as a subtle pre-text to create weapons. There is enough suspicion in the world, and Truman’s decision has led to decades of continued mistrust. Nuclear energy, when used and monitored properly, has the potential to help us alleviate our energy concerns, if not solve them. Truman changed the terms of conversation on nuclear energy, and we continue to suffer the consequences. Most importantly, there has been an effect on humanity that is difficult to measure, both scientifically and socially. In the past 40 years, we have devoted so much of our wealth and resources to nuclear arms instead of other social, educational, and medical programs.

In sum, Truman was wrong in his decision to drop the bombs. From our perspective in 2012, American citizens could be accused of presentism, could be told that the horror of extending the war through the will of the Japanese people would have been horrible. Truman made the most difficult decision in history, and he made the correct one at the time. However, as Queen Elizabeth II, who ascended to the throne just a few short years after WWII, once stated:

To all those who have suffered as a consequence of our troubled past I extend my sincere thoughts and deep sympathy. With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all.

If he were still alive, Truman would be wise to echo these words. In deciding to drop the atomic bombs, he knew that wartime sentiment would make it look like the right decision at the time. However, the history of our military, political, and energy decisions since those fateful days in August have shown us otherwise.

References

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