DOCUMENT #1

A PETITION TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Source: U.S. National Archives, Record Group 77, Records of the Chief of Engineers, Manhattan Engineer District, Harrison-Bundy File, folder #76.

On July 17, 1945, Leo Szilard and 69 co-signers at the Manhattan Project "Metallurgical Laboratory" in Chicago petitioned the President of the United States.

July 17, 1945

A PETITION TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Discoveries of which the people of the United States are not aware may affect the welfare of this nation in the near future. The liberation of atomic power which has been achieved places atomic bombs in the hands of the Army. It places in your hands, as Commander-in-Chief, the fateful decision whether or not to sanction the use of such bombs in the present phase of the war against Japan.

We, the undersigned scientists, have been working in the field of atomic power. Until recently, we have had to fear that the United States might be attacked by atomic bombs during this war and that her only defense might lie in a counterattack by the same means. Today, with the defeat of Germany, this danger is averted and we feel impelled to say what follows:

The war has to be brought speedily to a successful conclusion and attacks by atomic bombs may very well be an effective method of warfare. We feel, however, that such attacks on Japan could not be justified, at least not unless the terms which will be imposed after the war on Japan were made public in detail and Japan were given an opportunity to surrender.

If such public announcement gave assurance to the Japanese that they could look forward to a life devoted to peaceful pursuits in their homeland and if Japan still refused to surrender our nation might then, in certain circumstances, find itself forced to resort to the use of atomic bombs. Such a step, however, ought not to be made at any time without seriously considering the moral responsibilities which are involved.

The development of atomic power will provide the nations with new means of destruction. The atomic bombs at our disposal represent only the first step in this direction, and there is almost no limit to the destructive power which will become available in the course of their future development. Thus a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.

If after this war a situation is allowed to develop in the world which permits rival powers to be in uncontrolled possession of these new means of destruction, the cities of the United States as well as the cities of other nations will be in continuous danger of sudden annihilation. All the resources of the United States, moral and material, may have to be mobilized to prevent the advent of such a world situation. Its prevention is at present the solemn responsibility of the United States -- singled out by virtue of her lead in the field of atomic power.

The added material strength which this lead gives to the United States brings with it the obligation of restraint and if we were to violate this obligation our moral position would

be weakened in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes. It would then be more difficult for us to live up to our responsibility of bringing the unloosened forces of destruction under control.
In view of the foregoing, we, the undersigned, respectfully petition: first, that you exercise your power as Commander-in-Chief, to rule that the United States shall not resort to the use of atomic bombs in this war unless the terms which will be imposed upon Japan have been made public in detail and Japan knowing these terms has refused to surrender; second, that in such an event the question whether or not to use atomic bombs be decided by you in light of the considerations presented in this petition as well as all the other moral responsibilities which are involved.

Leo Szilard and 69 co-signers

DOCUMENT #2
Harry S. Truman, Diary, July 25, 1945

President Truman told his diary on July 25, 1945, that he had ordered the bomb used. Emphasis has been added to highlight Truman's apparent belief that he had ordered the bomb dropped on a "purely military" target, so that "military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children."

We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark. Anyway we "think" we have found the way to cause a disintegration of the atom. An experiment in the New Mexico desert was startling - to put it mildly. Thirteen pounds of the explosive caused the complete disintegration of a steel tower 60 feet high, created a crater 6 feet deep and 1,200 feet in diameter, knocked over a steel tower 1/2 mile away and knocked men down 10,000 yards away. The explosion was visible for more than 200 miles and audible for 40 miles and more.
This weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10th. **I have told the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children.** Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop that terrible bomb on the old capital or the new.
He and I are in accord. The **target will be a purely military one** and we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives. I'm sure they will not do that, but we will have given them the chance. It is certainly a good thing for the world that Hitler's crowd or Stalin's did not discover this atomic bomb. It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful...
Truman quoted in Robert H. Ferrell, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) pp. 55-56. Truman's writings are in the public domain.

DOCUMENT #3

Leo Szilard, Interview: President Truman Did Not Understand
An authorized web-reprint of the full text of
"President Truman Did Not Understand,"
U.S. News & World Report, August 15, 1960, pages 68-71.
Created: January 26, 1996
URL: http://www.peak.org/~danneng/decision/usnews.html

THE MAJOR MISTAKE

Q Have your views on this subject changed at all since 1945?
A No, except that I can say much more clearly today what I was thinking at that time than I was able to say it at that time. Today I would put the whole emphasis on the mistake of insisting on unconditional surrender. Today I would say that the confusion arose from considering the fake alternatives of either having to invade Japan or of having to use the bomb against her cities.
Q Would most other nations, including Russia, have done the same thing we did, confronted with the same opportunity to use the bomb?
A Look, answering this question would be pure speculation. I can say this, however: By and large, governments are guided by considerations of expediency rather than by moral considerations. And this, I think, is a universal law of how governments act.
Prior to the war I had the illusion that up to a point the American Government was different. This illusion was gone after Hiroshima.
Perhaps you remember that in 1939 President Roosevelt warned the belligerents against using bombs against the inhabited cities, and this I thought was perfectly fitting and natural.
Then, during the war, without any explanation, we began to use incendiary bombs against the cities of Japan. This was disturbing to me and it was disturbing many of my friends.
Q Was that the end of the illusion?
A Yes, this was the end of the illusion. But, you see, there was still a difference between using incendiary bombs and using the new force of nature for purposes of destruction. There was still a further step taken here - atomic energy was something new.
I thought it would be very bad to set a precedent for using atomic energy for purposes of destruction. And I think that having done so we have greatly affected the postwar history.

HOW BOMBING BOOMERANGED

Q In what way?
A I think it made it very difficult for us to take the position after the war that we wanted to get rid of atomic bombs because it would be immoral to use them against the civilian population. We lost the moral argument with which, right after the war, we might have perhaps gotten rid of the bomb.
Let me say only this much to the moral issue involved: Suppose Germany had developed two bombs before we had any bombs. And suppose Germany had dropped one bomb, say, on Rochester and the other on Buffalo, and then having run out of bombs she would

have lost the war. Can anyone doubt that we would then have defined the dropping of atomic bombs on cities as a war crime, and that we would have sentenced the Germans who were guilty of this crime to death at Nuremberg and hanged them?
But, again, don't misunderstand me. The only conclusion we can draw is that governments acting in a crisis are guided by questions of expediency, and moral considerations are given very little weight, and that America is no different from any other nation in this respect.

Q How would the world of today have been different if we had not dropped the atomic bomb on Japan?

A I think, if we had not dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and instead demonstrated the bomb after the war, then, if we had really wanted to rid the world of atomic bombs, I think we could probably have done it.
Now, whether this would have led to a better world or not, I don't know. But it certainly would have been a world very different from the one we have now.

Q Do you think it would have avoided a nuclear-arms race?

A I think we could have avoided a nuclear-arms race, yes, but we might still have gotten into conflict with Russia - over other issues.

Q Would the Russians have developed the atomic and hydrogen bombs as quickly if we had not dropped the bomb? Do you think they hurried up their espionage and research after Hiroshima?

A They had no choice but to hurry up with developing their own bomb, since they would not want us to have the monopoly of the bomb.

Q Were the Russians aware of the work we were doing?

A Yes. This I did not know at the time. I would say, in retrospect, that not testing the bomb probably would not have gained us very much time.

Q Do you think that the "missile age" would have come as quickly without the atomic bomb?

A No, the long-range missile would be completely useless without a nuclear warhead, because they are too expensive as vehicles for carrying TNT.

Q What about the space age in general? Would that also have been put off into the indefinite future?

A I should think so.

Q Then was space exploration - missile, hydrogen bombs, all the rest of it - a natural outgrowth of the atomic bomb?

A I think so. But, you see, I'm in no hurry to get to Mars or Venus. I don't value the exploration of the solar system as much as maybe others do.

Q Do Americans have a guilt complex over the bomb?

A I wouldn't call it exactly a "guilt complex." But you remember perhaps John Hersey's "Hiroshima." It made a very great impression on America, but it did not in England. Why?
It was we who used the bomb and not the English. Somewhere, below the level of consciousness, we have a stake in the bomb, which the English don't have. Still, I wouldn't call it a "guilt complex."

Q Has this feeling, whatever it is, affected us in any material way?

A Great power imposes the obligation of exercising restraint, and we did not live up to

this obligation. I think this affected many of the scientists in a subtle sense, and it diminished their desire to continue to work on the bomb.

Q Did Hiroshima affect our development of the hydrogen bomb?

A I should say it delayed it five years. I think, if we'd exercised restraint, many physicists would have continued to work on atomic energy after the war who did not.

Q Would a United States Government today, confronted with the same set of choices and approximately the same degree of military intelligence, reach a different decision as to using the first A-bomb?

A I think it depends on the person of the President. Truman did not understand what was involved. You can see that from the language he used. Truman announced the bombing of Hiroshima while he was at sea coming back from Potsdam, and his announcement contained the phrase - I quote from the New York "Times" of August 7, 1945: "We have spent 2 billion dollars on the greatest scientific gamble in history - and won."

To put the atomic bomb in terms of having gambled 2 billion dollars and having "won" offended my sense of proportions, and I concluded at that time that Truman did not understand at all what was involved.