Craig on Malloy, 'Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan'

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A Victorian Gentleman in the Atomic Court

The U.S. decision to drop atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 remains a subject of sustained and contentious historical debate. Historians and other scholars differ deeply in their answers to two related questions. Was the decision morally justifiable? And, what were the real reasons behind it? Scholars who believe that the Harry S. Truman administration was motivated in the end by its desire to end the war quickly and avoid any possibility of an invasion of mainland Japan tend to argue that it was justifiable; scholars who argue that other factors played a more important role, especially America’s desire to intimidate the Soviet Union and prevent it from advancing into Asia, tend to believe that the decision was morally wrong.

The debate continues on for three reasons. The atrocious nature of the attacks, which killed instantly perhaps one hundred thousand Japanese civilians and gruesomely injured and sickened hundreds of thousands more, has long tarnished our memory of America’s “good war,” as Studs Terkel described it in his eponymous 1984 book. The fact that the attacks both ended World War II and ushered in the Cold War puts them at the center of any account of the rise of American superpower. Moreover, historians have never been able to find definitive, “smoking-gun” documents that demonstrate precisely why Truman went ahead with the bombing. Our understanding of the decision, therefore, relies more on circumstantial evidence and deductive reasoning than do many other pivotal historical episodes.

With his fine study *Atomic Tragedy*, Sean L. Malloy enters cautiously into this debate. Malloy provides a political biography of Henry Lewis Stimson, who served as secretary of war under Franklin D. Roosevelt and Truman, that ranges from his early career as a Wall Street lawyer at the turn of the century to his final act as a public official, which was to make an impassioned call for international atomic control just after the war came to an end. But, as its subtitle suggests, all roads in the book lead to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Was the bombing just and necessary? Malloy does not directly answer this question; rather, he describes how this traditional Victorian man of affairs, outspokenly opposed to the bombardment of civilians, dedicated to the notion of fair play, wedded above all to the idea that the United States was a moral nation led by moral men, found himself accepting that it was.

By anyone’s definition, Stimson played a central part in the long train of decisions leading up to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Before Pearl Harbor, he distinguished himself as one of the Republican Party’s foremost advocates of intervention, something that led President Roosevelt, keen to garner
bipartisan support, to name him secretary of war. He was the inner cabinet’s point man on the Manhattan Project, serving as an intermediary between the president and officials primarily concerned with the bomb, though during most of the war Stimson, obviously occupied with innumerable other issues, did not pay detailed attention to the project. When it came time to decide how the bomb might be used, in the late spring and early summer of 1945, he established study groups and conveyed his ambiguous views to the new president, Truman. As Malloy shows, Stimson consistently, if quietly, denounced the idea of targeting a population center with atomic bombs, and managed to omit the ancient city of Kyoto from the target list.

But he never took more forceful steps to dissuade Truman from using the bombs when they became ready. At Potsdam in July, Stimson related to Truman the news of the successful Trinity test and went along with the decision to exclude the Soviet Union from the Potsdam Declaration, a move that was shaped by America’s intention to use the bomb (and redoubled Joseph Stalin’s determination to get his own). When Truman went ahead with the planned bombardment in early August--the president never actually “decided” to use the atomic bombs; rather, he decided not to prevent their scheduled use--Stimson did nothing. Soon after the end of the war, Stimson, clearly disturbed by his complicity in the attacks, demanded in his last act as secretary of war that the United States find some way to establish international control over the bomb. At a cabinet meeting on September 21, he passionately urged his colleagues to act now to negotiate with the USSR an agreement to avoid an atomic arms race: “civilization,” he said, demanded nothing less (p. 150). Over the next several months, the Truman administration failed to heed his advice seriously. Malloy’s account of Stimson's dark acquiescence and guilt during the victorious months of July, August, and September 1945 is historical writing of the first order.

Why did Stimson fail to dissuade Truman from using the bomb on civilian populations, and why did he fail to persuade the White House to pursue international control? To these questions Malloy offers perhaps too circumspect answers. Had Stimson insisted on an overture to the Japanese, assuring them perhaps that the emperor would not be harmed, or had he promoted an idea put forward by undersecretary of the navy Ralph Bard that Japan both be informed of the bomb before its use and told that the Soviet Union was prepared to enter the war against it, it is possible (though I would say doubtful) that Truman might have secured a Japanese surrender before Hiroshima or at least been persuaded to postpone the attack. Malloy plausibly suggests that Stimson's earlier inattention to the bomb prevented him from forming a resolute view on the question of how to use it; thus, the secretary of war iterated his opposition to directly targeting civilians and urged Truman to consider modifying unconditional surrender to avoid the bombing, but in the end chose not to insist on either issue. In the end, he rationalized, as did Truman, the obliteration of residential areas in Hiroshima and Nagasaki as attacks on “military targets” (p. 117).

Similarly, while Stimson rhetorically dedicated himself to the danger of atomic anarchy after the attacks, the fact remains that in his September 21 peroration he provided no concrete guidance to the president on how he might go about achieving international control. The objective was going to be exceedingly hard to meet. As Malloy states, such pursuit posed grave political challenges to Truman because of the growing suspicions of the USSR around Washington, and the unique levels of international trust that would have to be reached to work out a serious regime of international atomic control. In my view, a much more immediate factor, at least from Truman’s perspective, was the recent discovery of a major atomic espionage operation in Canada, with implications coming in (from
the irrepressible J. Edgar Hoover) that it had spread deeply into the United States. Truman knew that a plan to share atomic secrets with the Soviet Union and cooperate closely with it to establish international control was going to be a hard sell in any event, but with headlines blaring news about atomic spies running around Los Alamos and Washington it would be impossible. Stimson, however, had no answer to this problem—as Malloy notes, he never much cared for domestic political wrangling. Moreover, as he was about to retire, he would not be able to provide Truman any political cover, nor press for his cause in a White House full of nascent Cold Warriors. His call for atomic peace in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki stands more as a statement of ideals than as a concrete plan of action. This is the way forward, gentlemen: good luck.

Malloy aptly presents Stimson as a Victorian figure of tragedy. Clinging to traditional notions of honor, individual morality, and political moderation, he found himself swept away by the tide of modern war and a logic of international politics played for the highest stakes. There is much to this analysis. I am not sure, though, that the secretary of war was quite as ingenuous as Malloy sometimes portrays him. Perhaps he went along with Truman's rationalization that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were “war plant” targets, but did he really believe it? If so, why did he go to such lengths to spare Kyoto, where there were probably more actual military targets than in the two cities that were bombed?  Perhaps he believed that his overriding mission was now to convince the president that the advent of atomic weaponry demanded a new form of international cooperation, but did he really believe that Truman, president for only a few months, in possession of an atomic monopoly, and not wishing to be run out of Washington on a rail, could take the extreme political risks of pursuing it? If so, why did he leave the city as fast as he could and never, even as his health improved, seriously push Truman on the issue? Stimson was torn between a Victorian and a modern understanding of politics, but that does not mean he was blind to the latter's dictates. He famously once said that “Gentlemen do not read each other's mail.” But during World War II, the Americans broke codes with the best of them.

Notes

[1]. For an original answer to this question, see Jason Kelly, “Probity, Strategy and Culture: Stimson and the Sparing of Kyoto in Postwar Historiography” (master's thesis, Yale University, 2005).


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