

## Sixty-Eight Years Ago: Truman Opened the Nuclear Era With a Lie About Hiroshima | The Nation

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*US President Harry Truman broadcasts a message on the formal surrender of Japan. (AP Photo, File)*

When the shocking news emerged that morning, exactly sixty-eight years ago, it took the form of a routine press release, a little more than 1,000 words long. President Harry S. Truman was in the middle of the Atlantic, returning from the Potsdam conference with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin. Shortly before 11 o'clock, an information officer from the Pentagon arrived at the White House carrying bundles of press releases. A few minutes later, assistant press secretary Eben Ayers started reading the announcement to about a dozen members of the Washington press corps.

In this way, on this day, President Truman informed the press, and the world, that America's war against fascism—with victory over Germany already in hand—had culminated in exploding a revolutionary new weapon over a Japanese target.

The atmosphere was so casual, many reporters had difficulty grasping the announcement. "The thing didn't penetrate with most of them," Ayers later remarked. Finally, the journalists rushed to call their editors.

The first few sentences of the statement set the tone: "Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of TNT.

...The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold.... It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe.”

Truman’s four-page statement had been crafted with considerable care over many months, as my research at the Truman Library [for two books on the subject](#) made clear. With use of the atomic bomb rarely debated at the highest levels, an announcement of this sort was inevitable—if the new weapon actually worked.

Those who helped prepare the presidential statement—principally Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson—sensed that the stakes were high, for this marked the unveiling of both the atomic bomb and the official narrative of Hiroshima, which largely persists to this day. It was vital that this event be viewed as consistent with American decency and concern for human life.

And so, from its very first words, the official narrative was built on a lie, or at best a half-truth. Hiroshima did contain an important military base, used as a staging area for Southeast Asia, where perhaps 25,000 troops might be quartered. But the bomb had been aimed not at the “Army base” but at the very center of a city of 350,000, with the vast majority women and children and elderly males.

In fact, the two most important reasons Hiroshima had been chosen as our number-one target were: it had been relatively untouched by conventional bombs, meaning its large population was still in place and the bomb’s effects could be fully judged; and the hills which surround the city on three sides would have a “focusing effect” (as the target committee put it), increasing the bomb’s destructive force.

Indeed, a US survey of the damage, not released to the press, found that residential areas bore the brunt of the bomb, with less than 10 percent of the city’s manufacturing, transportation and storage facilities damaged.

There was something else missing in the Truman announcement: because the president in his statement failed to mention radiation effects, which officials knew would be horrendous, the imagery of just “a bigger bomb” would prevail for days in the press. Truman described the new weapon as “revolutionary” but only in regard to the destruction it could cause, failing to even mention its most lethal new feature: radiation.

In many ways, the same dangerous myth about nuclear weapons, first promoted by Truman, persists in the minds of many today: that any use of the more powerful weapons of today by a state (say, the United States or Israel) could be and would be targeted on strictly military enclaves or weapon sites, with little threat to thousands or millions living nearby.

Many Americans on August 6, 1945, heard the news from the radio, which broadcast the text of Truman’s statement shortly after its release. The afternoon papers carried banner headlines along the lines of: “Atom Bomb, World’s Greatest, Hits Japs!”

On the evening of August 9, Truman addressed the American people over the radio. Again he took pains to picture Hiroshima as a military base, even claiming that “we wished in the first attack to avoid, in so far as possible, the killing of civilians.” By then, an American B-29 had dropped a second atomic bomb over the city of Nagasaki, which killed tens of thousands of civilians and only a handful of Japanese troops (along with Allied prisoners of war). Nagasaki was variously described by US officials as a “naval base” or “industrial center.”

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