

April 25, 1994

MEMORANDUM TO: Martin Harwit, "Tiger Team" members, exhibit team

FROM: Michael Neufeld

SUBJECT: The "decision to drop the bomb" and "Crossroads"

During the preliminary meeting with the "Tiger Team" last Friday, we had a passing discussion about the purpose of the exhibit and the so-called decision to drop the bomb which, in hindsight, has bothered me. The clear implication was that the atomic bombings of Japan were "debatable," as I put it, only because some pacifists think that they were immoral. Attempts to reevaluate the decision were largely dismissed as "speculation." In fact, thirty years of scholarly research (ably summarized in J. Samuel Walker's article, "The Decision to Use the Bomb: An Historiographic Update," which I have distributed to many of you), has shown that the decision is debatable on its political and military merits--a conclusion which goes to the heart of the exhibit concept. This research obviously has not resolved the debate; indeed it cannot resolve the debate, since too many factors that went into the decision remain subject to dispute. But this research has produced much new knowledge that must be communicated in some form to the public.

One of the most important conclusions one can draw from this research is that, although it is certainly still possible to argue for the correctness of Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb without warning, the traditional justification used in this country is no longer tenable. That justification, which is endlessly repeated with almost religious fervor, asserts that Truman was faced with only two options: a) drop the bomb without warning, or b) invade Japan at the cost of a quarter of a million, half a million, a million or many millions of American and/or Japanese lives, depending on what version is being told. This account is untenable for at least four reasons:

- 1) Casualties. We know for a fact that the military chiefs never presented such numbers to Truman. When civilians bandied about numbers in the range of a half million, they were clearly rejected by Gen. Marshall and his staff. Only Adm. Leahy hinted at higher casualties for "Olympic" (the first, Kyushu invasion) in the June 18 meeting between Truman and the JCS, but never presented a concrete figure. Generals MacArthur, Marshall and Handy supported casualty figures of 30-50,000 for the first month of "Olympic" (of which about 20% would be deaths), which were comparable to Luzon and Normandy. New historical research (such as Skates' The Invasion of Japan) supports these numbers as realistic. The second invasion, "Coronet," was unlikely to have happened, since the Japanese would have expended all their reserves of ground units, aircraft and suicide boats on "Olympic." In any case, a fundamental assumption behind the half a million

American dead figures is wrong: the U.S. military never planned to conquer every square inch of Japan by force, but only to occupy two key areas: southern Kyushu and the Kanto Plain around Tokyo. All indications are that this would have sufficed to force the Japanese to surrender, if "Olympic" alone did not.

2) Options. Truman was never presented with a clear set of options to dropping the atomic bomb without warning, such as can be constructed in hindsight. Options were, however, discussed in his presence or by his advisers. Grew pressed him to modify unconditional surrender by offering an Emperor guarantee. The possibility of doing a demonstration, or dropping the bomb on an uninhabited target, etc., were also discussed, although not in much depth. The probable shock effect on the Japanese of Soviet entry into the Pacific war was also realized, although that entry was always seen by Marshall's staff as crucial to the invasion of Japan, not as an option to the bomb. Some Navy and AAF leaders also advocated waiting for blockade and bombing to take their toll on the Japanese, but did not have the influence that Marshall did. They could accept "Olympic" anyway, since it would create a new set of naval and air bases in southern Kyushu to extend the blockade and bombing.

3) An Early End to the War. A key assumption behind the traditional justification is that the Japanese leadership would have gone on fighting almost indefinitely without the use of the bomb. With the advantage of hindsight and knowledge of the inner workings of the Japanese government, it now seems clear that the odds of Japan quitting in the summer and fall of 1945 were considerable. Soviet entry or an Emperor guarantee or both might well have sufficed. The Japanese elite, especially the militarist fanatics, have a great deal of responsibility for what happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, since they could not come up with a realistic surrender offer, but they did tentatively communicate their interest in quitting through the Moscow initiative.

4) Momentum and the Soviet Factor. The traditional justification also grossly oversimplifies by leaving out contributing factors to Truman's decision (such as it was--in the context of 1945, Truman was unlikely to have done anything else): the momentum of the Manhattan Project and the "bonus" that American use of the bomb might have in Soviet-American relations. Although most historians agree that the key factors in Truman's decision were casualties and an early end to the war, evidence clearly suggests that these other factors added weight to the decision.

All of this is not to say that the exhibit should take any position on these controversies--indeed it does not. But it is clearly in the Smithsonian's charge, "the increase and diffusion of knowledge," to make this scholarly research accessible to the public. It is also important to realize that, if one of the central concepts of the exhibit is that the use of the bomb is debatable, this research clearly supports that assumption.