

Legal History

The Serendipity of History: Henry Stimson and the Saving of Kyoto

By C. Evan Stewart

Henry L. Stimson was certainly one of the great Americans of the 20th century. Successor to Elihu Root as the leading member of the New York City Bar, Stimson was a founding partner of Winthrop, Stimson, Putnam & Roberts (now Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman), U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Gov. General of the Philippines, Secretary of War for William Howard Taft, Secretary of State for Herbert Hoover, and Secretary of War once again for Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman.

During World War I, the 50-year-old Stimson joined the army and was commissioned as a colonel in the 77th Regiment. Stimson revered his army service; he took great pride in being addressed as Col. Stimson for the remainder of his life.

And while Stimson was at the heart of many of the 20th century's historic events, it is a serendipitous trip he took in the summer of 1926 as a private citizen on which the focus of this article pivots.

As part of a "second honeymoon" tour of the Orient with his wife, Stimson visited Kyoto,

the ancient capital of Japan.

Kyoto was (and is) the cultural and historical center of Japan. Unlike the rest of that nation, Kyoto had resisted aping the Western world and had retained its pre-Matthew Perry look and feel.

The city impressed the Stimsons as a place of great physical beauty, and they were moved by its fascinating art, its gardens, and the ancient religious structures they witnessed. (Three years later, in his capacity as Secretary of State, Stimson again visited Kyoto.)

War Passion and Hysteria

Fast forward two decades to the spring and summer of 1945: Franklin Roosevelt has died; the war in Europe is over; the war in the Pacific is still raging; and an old (77) and tired Secretary of War is the neophyte president's principal advisor on, among other things, the development and deployment of S-1 (the atomic bomb).

Stimson, in attempting to counsel Truman on that unprecedented situation, recognized that he was faced with overcoming "the feeling of war passion and hysteria which seizes hold of a nation like ours in the prosecution of such a bitter war."

One particular sore point for Stimson was the military's widescale targeting of enemy civilians for air force bombing sorties. Universally thought to be immoral and contrary to the laws of war prior to 1940, this practice by 1945 seemed to bother

very few people (in or out of the government). Stimson was one, however, and he had extracted a promise from a key aide, Robert Lovett (the Assistant Secretary of War for Air), that “there would be only precision bombing in Japan.”

Notwithstanding Lovett’s personal rectitude, that promise did not stand for much in the face of Gen. Curtis LeMay’s 20th Bomber Command, which in 1945 was engaged in the massive firebombing of Japanese cities.

On March 9, LeMay’s bombers perfected this tactic of war, virtually incinerating 16 square miles of Tokyo and killing approximately 100,000 people (more than the number that would die at either Hiroshima or Nagasaki); a little more than two months later, on May 25, LeMay’s planes returned to Tokyo and destroyed another 19 square miles of the city.

Just two weeks before the second attack on Tokyo, the government’s Target Committee (in charge of picking out sites for the atomic bomb(s)) met. As reflected in the minutes of meetings on May 10 and 11, the Committee resolved that the *primary* target would be Kyoto, a site that Stimson had lobbied the head of the Army Air Force, Hap Arnold, to be spared from LeMay’s bombers. The Committee’s rationale for selecting Kyoto was as follows:

This target is an urban industrial area with a population of 1,000,000. It is the former

capital of Japan and many people and industries are now being moved there as other areas are being destroyed. From the psychological point of view there is the advantage that Kyoto is an intellectual center for Japan and the people there are more apt to appreciate the significance of such a weapon as the gadget.

And just so this latter point was not lost on anyone, the minutes later reiterated the Committee’s consensus that “Kyoto has the advantage of the people being more highly intelligent and hence better able to appreciate the significance of the weapon.”

After the Target Committee reaffirmed on May 25 that Kyoto would be the primary target, Stimson called for Gen. Leslie Groves, who was the military’s man in charge of the S-1 project (and the overseer of the Target Committee).

In a direct confrontation between the two men, Groves defended the selection on the ground that Kyoto was “large enough in area for us to gain complete knowledge of the effects of the bomb. Hiroshima [the Committee’s second choice] was not nearly so satisfactory in this respect.”

Stimson, however, overruled Groves, uncharacteristically barking: “On this matter, I am the kingpin.” Labeling it akin to the Japanese targeting the Lincoln Memorial, Stimson demanded that Kyoto be taken off the list altogether.

Stimson Was No “Dove”

Having saved Japan’s cultural hub (or so he thought) did not mean that Stimson was squeamish about using the atomic weapon.

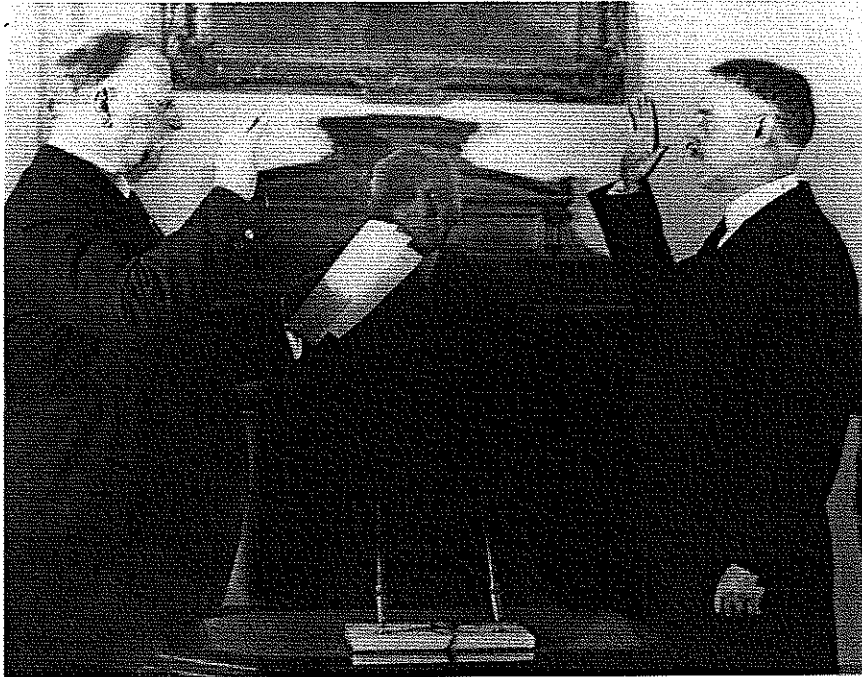
In fact, on May 31, at a meeting of the Interim Committee (the president’s group of senior advisors on the S-1, chaired by Stimson), “the Secretary [of War] expressed the conclusion, on which there was general agreement, that we could not give the Japanese any warning; that we could not concentrate on a civilian area; but that we should seek to make a profound impression on as many of the inhabitants as possible.

At the suggestion of Dr. Conant the Secretary [of War] agreed that the most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers’ houses.”

On June 6, Stimson met with Truman at the White House to brief him on several matters. When the subject turned to S-1, Stimson later wrote that he told the president: “I was a little fearful that before we could get ready the Air Force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon would not have a fair background to show its strength. He laughed and said he understood.”

Kyoto Redux

Notwithstanding Stimson’s unequivocal order vis-à-vis Kyoto, Gen. Groves did not give



Chief Justice Taft swearing in Col. Stimson as Secretary of State. Photo courtesy Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP.

up so easily. On July 21, while Stimson was at the Potsdam Conference, he received a detailed report from Groves on the successful testing of the S-1. Stimson read the report in its entirety to Truman and Secretary of State James Byrnes. According to Stimson, the president “was tremendously pepped up” by the report, telling Stimson that “it gave him an entirely new feeling of confidence” (a confidence reflected in his subsequent dealings with Stalin).

Later that same day, Stimson received two cables on S-1 from an aide in Washington, one of which reflected Groves’ request to reverse Stimson’s decision to strike Kyoto as the primary target. Angered by Groves’ action, Stimson cabled back that “he saw no new factors for reversing myself but on the con-

trary the new factors seemed to confirm it.” [Exactly what “new factors” “confirm[ed]” Stimson’s decision are unclear. They may well have been the deciphered Japanese cables reflecting that Japan was seeking a way out of the war via Soviet mediation, as well as Stalin’s commitment at Potsdam to enter the Pacific War by mid-August.]

The very next day, Stimson revisited this issue with the president, and reported on his cable back to Washington; Stimson later wrote in his diary: “As to the matter of the special target [Kyoto] which I refused to permit, [Truman] strongly confirmed my view and said he felt the same way.” Running into Hap Arnold later that same day, Stimson replayed the matter to the Army Air Force chief, who told Stimson “he agreed with me

about the target which I had struck off the program.”

On July 24, Stimson met with Truman to go over a host of pressing issues (e.g., the text of the Potsdam Declaration). Stimson later wrote that toward the end of the meeting:

We had a few words more about the S-1 program, and I gave him my reasons for eliminating one of the proposed targets [Kyoto]. He again reiterated with the utmost emphasis his own concurring belief on that subject, and he was particularly emphatic in agreeing with my suggestion that if elimination was not done, the bitterness which would be caused by such a wanton act might make it impossible during the long post-war period to reconcile the Japanese to us in that area rather than to the Russians. It might thus, I pointed out, be the means of preventing what our policy demanded, namely a sympathetic Japan to the United States in case there should be any aggression by Russia in Manchuria.

And on July 25, Truman recorded in his own diary:

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 and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common

welfare cannot drop this terrible bomb on the old capital [Kyoto] or the new [Tokyo].

Conclusion

Because of Stimson's persistence, Kyoto was saved. Hiroshima thus became the target for the first nuclear weapon ("Little Boy") on August 6, 1945. Serendipity of a different sort played a role in the dropping of the second bomb ("Fat Man"): Because the weather was too cloudy over Kokura on August 9, Nagasaki became the target.

Postscripts

- Stimson was very much a product of the elite, Victorian society into which he was born and raised. Two of his quotes illustrate this well. The first is: "The only way to make a man trustworthy is to trust him." The other comes from when, as Secretary of State, he shut down that department's cryptoanalytic office, justifying the action: "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail."
- The starting point for further reading on Stimson is *On Active Service in Peace and War*, a memoir he wrote with McGeorge Bundy (Harper & Brothers 1948); most historians have cautioned that the memoir's depiction of the decision making vis-à-vis the dropping of the atomic weapons on Japan is not a complete one. A recent book

by Sean Malloy (*Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, Cornell 2008) presents the current historiography on this important subject. See also J. Samuel Walker, "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground," (*Diplomatic History*, April 2005). Recent books that put the atomic decision making within the greater context of the end of World War II include Max Hasting's *Retribution: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45* (Knopf 2008) and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Harvard 2005).

- Stimson was an important mentor to many future leaders and left a lasting impression on many he never met. That influence is well captured in Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas' *The Wise Men* (Simon and Schuster 1986). Two examples of Stimson's influence should suffice.

(1) Robert Lovett, who would later serve as Undersecretary of State and Secretary of Defense in the Truman Administration, was summoned by President Kennedy to the White House at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis (Kennedy had previously offered Lovett his choice of Secretary of State, Treasury,

or Defense; he declined them all). Upon his arrival, Lovett went to the office of McGeorge Bundy, JFK's National Security Adviser. As recorded in *The Wise Men*:

On a small table near Bundy's desk Lovett noticed a photograph of Henry Stimson. "All during the conversation," Lovett recalled, "the old Colonel seemed to be staring me straight in the face." Lovett invoked their mutual icon: "Mac, I think the best service we can perform for the President is try to approach this as Colonel Stimson would." Bundy agreed; Stimson would be their "bench mark."

(2) Stimson, an Andover graduate and Chairman of the Board of Trustees, addressed the graduates of the class in the spring of 1940, against the backdrop of France's collapse and Great Britain gearing up to stand alone against a possible German invasion. As World War II looked to engulf the United States, the colonel sought to inspire the entire prep school audience:

[A]s I look into your faces and realize your responsibilities, I am filled, not only with pity for what you are facing, but with a desire to congratulate you on your great opportunity. I envy

you that opportunity. I would to God that I were young enough to face it with you.

In the audience was an idealistic underformer named George Herbert Walker Bush. After Pearl Harbor, Bush vowed to heed Stimson's call to service and join the Naval aviation program once he graduated. In the spring of 1942, Stimson again gave the graduation address. This time, however, he told the graduating seniors (including Bush) to go to college first and then serve their country. After the ceremony, Bush's father confronted his son: "Well, George, did the Secretary say anything to change your mind?" "No, sir," answered the 41st president, "I'm going in." ♦