December 6, 1952

The President,
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

For several years it has been my privilege to serve as one of the editors and authors of The Army Air Forces in World War II, a history published on a non-profit basis under the joint sponsorship of the U.S. Air Force and the University of Chicago. One of my tasks for the fifth volume, now in press, was to write an account of the atomic bomb attacks against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In respect to the decision to use the bomb I have been faced with an apparent discrepancy in the evidence which I have been unable to resolve, and, in spite of a reluctance to intrude upon the time of the President, I am turning to you for information for which you are the best and perhaps the sole authority.

I have read with great interest your own statements—that released on 6 August 1945 and that contained in your letter to Dr. Karl T. Compton, dated 16 December 1946 and published in the Atlantic Monthly of February 1947. I have read also the late Mr. Stimson's more detailed account in Harper's Magazine of February 1947 which is in perfect accord with yours—the gist being that the dread decision for which you courageously assumed responsibility was made at Potsdam in the face of Premier Suzuki's rejection of the warning contained in the Potsdam Declaration of 26 July, and that the motive was to avoid the great loss of life that would have attended the invasion of Kyushu scheduled for November.

More recently I have seen a photostatic copy of the directive to Gen. Carl Spaatz ordering him to deliver the first atomic bomb against one of four designated targets; the document has been declassified and I am enclosing a true copy. The letter is dated at Washington on 25 July 1945 and bears the signature of Gen. Thomas T. Handy, Acting Chief of Staff during General Marshall’s absence at Potsdam. According to General Arnold’s statement elsewhere (H. H. Arnold, Global Mission (New York, 1949), p. 807), this directive was based on a memorandum dispatched by courier to Washington after a conference on 22 July between himself, Secretary Stimson, and General Marshall.

The directive contains an unqualified order to launch the attack “as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945.”
There is no reference to the Potsdam Declaration which was to be issued on the next day and no statement as to what should be done in the event of a Japanese offer to surrender before 3 August. It is possible that the written directive was qualified by oral instructions, or that it was intended that it be countermanded by a radio message if the Japanese did accept the Potsdam terms, or that the directive was an erroneous representation of Secretary Stimson's real intentions. Nevertheless, as it stands the directive seems to indicate that the decision to use the bomb had been made at least one day before the promulgation of the Potsdam Declaration and two days before Suzuki's rejection thereof on 20 July, Tokyo time. Such an interpretation is in flat contradiction to the explanation implicit in the published statements, that the final decision was made only after the Japanese refusal of the ultimatum.

Because of the extraordinary importance of this problem, I am appealing to you for more complete information as to the time and the circumstances under which you arrived at the final decision, and for permission to quote your reply in the volume of which I have spoken. Your well-known interest in history has encouraged me to seek my information at the source, as the historian should, without apology other than for having intruded on your crowded schedule with a letter made overly long by my desire to state the problem accurately.

Very truly yours,

James L. Gate
Professor of Medieval History

Inclosure
My dear Professor Cate:

Your letter of December 6, 1942 has just now been delivered to me.

When the message came to Potsdam that a successful atomic explosion had taken place in New Mexico, there was much excitement and conversation about the effect on the war then in progress with Japan.

The next day I told the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Generalissimo Stalin that the explosion had been a success. The British Prime Minister understood and appreciated what I'd told him. Premier Stalin smiled and thanked me for reporting the explosion to him, but I'm sure he did not understand its significance.

I called a meeting of the Secretary of State, Mr. Byrnes, the Secretary of War, Mr. Stimson, Admiral Leahy, General Marshall, General Eisenhowor, Admiral King and some others, to discuss what should be done with this awful weapon.

I asked General Marshall what it would cost in lives to land on the Tokyo plain and other places in Japan. It was his opinion that such an invasion would cost at a minimum one quarter of a million casualties, and might cost as much as a million, on the American side alone, with an equal number of the enemy. The other military and naval men present agreed.

I asked Secretary Stimson which cities in Japan were devoted exclusively to war production. He promptly named Hiroshima and Nagasaki, among others.

We sent an ultimatum to Japan. It was ignored.

I ordered atomic bombs dropped on the two cities named on the way back from Potsdam, when we were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

In your letter, you raise the fact that the directive to General Spots to prepare for delivering the bomb is dated
July 25. It was, of course, necessary to set the military wheels in motion, as these orders did not come, but the final decision was in my hands, and was not made until we were returning from Potsdam.

Dropping the bombs ended the war, saved lives, and gave the free nations a chance to face the facts.

When it looked as if Japan would quit, Russia hurried into the fray less than a week before the surrender, so as to be in at the settlement. No military contribution was made by the Russians toward victory over Japan. Prisoners were surrendered and Manchuria occupied, as was Korea, north of the 38th parallel.

Sincerely yours,

Professor James L. Cate
The University of Chicago
Chicago 3, Illinois
WAR DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF STAFF
Washington 25, D. C.

25 July 1945

TO: General Carl Spaatz
Commanding General
United States Army Strategic Air Forces

1. The 509 Composite Group, 20th Air Force will deliver its first special bomb as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945 on one of the targets: Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata and Nagasaki. To carry military and civilian scientific personnel from the War Department to observe and record the effects of the explosion of the bomb, additional aircraft will accompany the airplane carrying the bomb. The observing planes will stay several miles distant from the point of impact of the bomb.

2. Additional bombs will be delivered on the above targets as soon as made ready by the project staff. Further instructions will be issued concerning targets other than those listed above.

3. Dissemination of any and all information concerning the use of the weapon against Japan is reserved to the Secretary of War and the President of the United States. No communiques on the subject or releases of information will be issued by Commanders in the field without specific prior authority. Any news stories will be sent to the War Department for special clearance.

4. The foregoing directive is issued to you by direction and with the approval of the Secretary of War and of the Chief of Staff, USA. It is desired that you personally deliver one copy of this directive to General MacArthur and one copy to Admiral Nimitz for their information.

/S/ Thos. T. Handy
THOS. T. HARDY
General, O.S.C.
Acting Chief of Staff
My dear Professor Cate:

Your letter of Dec. 15, 1952 has just now been delivered to me.

When the news came to Potsdam that a successful atomic explosion had taken place in New Mexico, there was much excitement and speculation about the effect on the matter in progress with Japan. The next day, the British Prime Minister, after correspondence with Churchill, and personally, told me that the explosion had been a success. The British Prime Minister understood and appreciated what I had told him. Prime Minister Stalin smiled and thanked me.
for reporting the explosion to him but he was sure he did not understand its significance.

I called a meeting of the Sec., of State, the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, Adm. Leahy, Gen. Marshall, Gen. Eisenhower, the Sec. of the Navy, Adm. King and some others to discuss what should be done with the airdfree ground.

I asked Gen. Marshall what it would cost in lives to land on the Tokio plane and other places in Japan. It was his opinion that 100,000 casualties would be the minimum cost as well as an equal number of the enemy.
the other military and naval areas present agreed.

I asked Sec. Stimson which cities in Japan were devoted exclusively to war production. He promptly named Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

We sent an ultimatum to Japan. It was ignored.

Fifteen atomic bombs dropped on the two cities, started on their way back from Potlachen when we were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

Dropping the bombs ended the war.
THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

the free states as a chance to face the facts.

When it looked as if Japan would quit, Russia hurried into the fray before the surrender so as to be at the settlement. No military contribution was made by the Russians toward victory over Japan. Prisoners were surrendered and Manchuria occupied as was Korea south of the 38th parallel.

Russia in Asia has been a great liability since.
THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

December 23, 1952

MEMORANDUM TO GENERAL LANDMY:

Attached is a letter from Professor Gate of the University of Chicago asking clarification of the precise circumstances under which the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

If this letter is to be answered, it may take some research in official files and discussion with the President. Since this is an Air Force project, perhaps it would be more appropriate if you checked into this thing.

If, when the information is available, you wish us to write a reply, we will be glad to do so.

IRVING PERLMUTER

Attachment
MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Mr. President, it would be very desirable, if you could do it, to let this historian have such information as could be used in the history that he is writing concerning the circumstances under which the first atomic bombs were dropped.

Incl.

[Signature]
MEMORANDUM FOR MR. LLOYD:

There are two points in the President’s draft which should be changed. On page 2, it is stated: "I asked Gen. Marshall what it would cost in lives to land on the Tokio plane and other places in Japan. It was his opinion that 2 million casualties would be the minimum cost as well as an equal number of the enemy." Stimson says in his book On Active Service, p. 619: "We estimated that if we should be forced to carry this plan to its conclusion, the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1945, at the earliest. I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties, to American forces alone." I think it is important that the President’s casualty figure be changed to conform with that of Secretary Stimson, because presumably Stimson got his from Gen. Marshall; the size of the figure is very important.

On page 4, it is stated: "When it looked as if Japan would quit, Russia hurled into the fray nine days before the surrender so as to be in at the settlement." Actually, Russia announced her decision to enter the Japanese War on August 8, effective August 9; the surrender of Japan was tendered on August 12. Therefore, the statement should be amended to read "five days before the surrender" or "less than a week before the surrender."

In his letter to the President, Professor Cate calls attention to the directive of July 25, 1945 from Gen. Halsey to Gen. Spaatz, containing an unqualified order to launch the atomic bomb attack. Professor Cate asks whether this directive does not contradict published statements that the final decision was made only after the Japanese refusal of the ultimatum.

According to Dr. Rudolph Winkler, Historian of the Office of Secretary of Defense, it is clear that the Gen. Handy order could have been countermanded in the event Japan had responded to the Potsdam ultimatum — just as necessary. The order can be countermanded. The fundamental decision to use the bomb preceded the Gen. Handy letter, and the decision to "trigger" its use and define the targets was made by the President as indicated in his memorandum. I do not feel this needs elaboration.

K. W. N.
KENNETH W. HIGGLESHER
MEMORANDUM FOR MR. LLOYD

January 5, 1953

Dr. Winnecker called regarding the dropping of the atomic bombs, and said that all his records show are that General Groves reported on the effectiveness of the bomb test in New Mexico, reporting on July 21, and Secretary Stimson and others at Potsdam conferred daily with the President on July 22, July 23, and July 24. Presumably Secretary of the Navy Forrestal was not present at the conference to which the President refers as he did not arrive at Potsdam until July 23 at 5:00 P.M. The only other information which Dr. Winnecker has is that the operation, initially scheduled for August 3, was postponed on two occasions (presumably due to weather).

Dr. Winnecker says that Admiral Dandoon has all of the Potsdam papers, which Winnecker believes it will be necessary for us to look at in order to get a conclusive answer to the questions raised by the President's note.

Roberta Harrow says that the President left Washington for Potsdam on July 6 at 11:00 P.M., arrived on July 15, departed on the return trip on August 2 at 8:00 P.M., and arrived in Washington, D.C., on August 8 at 10:50 P.M. The Potsdam Conference actually lasted during the days July 17 to August 2, 1945.
January 5, 1953

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. LLOYD:

Supplementing my previous note on the conversation with Dr. Wissecker, Gordon Arneson of the Department of State (an adviser on atomic energy) states that the order from General Randt to General Spaatz was necessary because orders had to be cut in advance and the wheels had to be set in motion, even though the final decision on dropping the bomb was necessarily in the hands of the President.

Arneson does not have a full list of the participants in the meeting at Potdam, but he feels that Harvey Bundy, special assistant to Secretary Stimson on atomic matters, was present. Wissecker feels that McGly may have been present, but he has no way of checking.

Arneson is sure that the President made the decision to drop the bomb at the last minute, on the way back from Potdam.

He has no information on the selection or elimination of targets at the Potdam meeting other than what Stimson says in his book about the elimination of Kyoto.

Bundy may have some information on this according to Arneson; Bundy is now with the law firm of Choate, Hall and Stewart in Boston.

KENNETH W. HEGLE
MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT:

January 6, 1953

At your request I have reviewed your draft letter to Professor Gates, and I have made a few slight revisions after checking the details.

In your draft, you state that General Marshall told you that a landing in Japan would cost a quarter of a million casualties to the United States, and an equal number of the enemy. Mr. Stimson, in his book written by McGeorge Bundy, says that Marshall's estimate was over a million casualties. Your recollection sounds more reasonable than Stimson's, but in order to avoid a conflict, I have changed the wording to read that General Marshall expected a minimum of a quarter of a million casualties and possibly a much greater number — as much as a million.

Secretary Forrestal does not appear to have been at the Potsdam meetings until July 26, and your conferences about the atom bomb appear to have taken place early in the meeting on July 22, 23 and 24. Accordingly, I have deleted the Secretary of the Navy from the list of those with whom you conferred.

I have also inserted a paragraph explaining why the orders to General Spatz were dated July 23 rather than after the ultimatum. This has been checked with the historian of the Department of Defense.

Russian entry into the war was less than a week before the surrender.

I have deleted the last sentence of your draft, since I think that it might be unfairly used by the propagandists of the political opposition. It states a fundamental truth, but in a very restrained way, and it seemed to me that it might raise more problems than it would help.

I attach various memoranda to me on this subject from Kenneth Hechler who did the research.
My dear Professor Gates,

Your letter of December 6, 1952 has just now been delivered to me.

When the message came to Potsdam that a successful atomic explosion had taken place in New Mexico, there was much excitement and conversation about the effect on the war then in progress with Japan.

The next day I told the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Generalissimo Stalin that the explosion had been a success. The British Prime Minister understood and appreciated what I'd told him. Premier Stalin smiled and thanked me for reporting the explosion to him, but I'm sure he did not understand its significance.

I called a meeting of the Secretary of State, Mr. Byrnes, the Secretary of War, Mr. Stimson, Admiral Leahy, General Marshall, General Eisenhower, Admiral King and some others, to discuss what should be done with this awful weapon.

I asked General Marshall what it would cost in lives to land on the Tokyo plain and other places in Japan. It was his opinion that such an invasion would cost at a minimum one quarter of a million casualties, and might cost as much as a million, on the American side alone, with an equal number of the enemy. The other military and naval men present agreed.

I asked Secretary Stimson which cities in Japan were devoted exclusively to war production. He promptly named Hiroshima and Nagasaki, among others.

We sent an ultimatum to Japan. It was rejected.

I ordered atomic bombs dropped on the two cities named on the way back from Potsdam, when we were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

In your letter, you raise the fact that the directive
to General Spears to prepare for delivering the bomb in July twenty-fifth. It was, of course, necessary to act the military wheels in motion, as these orders did, but the final decision was in my hands, and was not made until we were returning from Potsdam.

Dropping the bombs ended the war, saved lives, and gave the free nations a chance to face the facts.

When it seemed as if Japan would quit, Russia hurried into the fray less than a week before the surrender, so as to be in at the settlement. No military contribution was made by the Russians toward victory over Japan. Prisoners were surrendered and Manchuria occupied by the Soviets, as was Korea, north of the 38th parallel.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Professor James L. Cepe,  
Department of History,  
The University of Chicago,  
1126 East 59th Street,  
Chicago 11,  
Illinois.