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## The Commander in Chief: The Fateful Decision of an American President

Emilio F. Iodice  
efiodice@yahoo.com

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# The Commander in Chief

## *The Fateful Decision of an American President*



Harry Truman, Courtesy of National Archives

— EMILIO IODICE, ROME, ITALY



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*To be president of the United States is to be lonely, very lonely at times of great decisions. I'd rather have lasting peace in the world than be president. I wish for peace, I work for peace, and I pray for peace continually. We can well afford to pay the price of peace. Our only alternative is to pay the terrible cost of war.*

— Harry Truman

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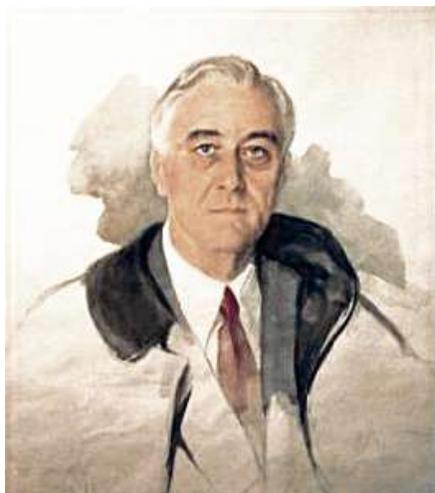
Writing to his mother and sister back in Grandview, Missouri, on April 12, 1945, Vice President Harry S. Truman passed along some exciting news: His coming radio address for Jefferson Day, which Franklin D. Roosevelt created to mark the third president's birthday, would be broadcast nationwide the following evening.

It was a Thursday morning, and Truman was presiding over the Senate, listening to a "windy senator" make "a speech on a subject with which he is in no way familiar." The senator's verbosity provided a break in the action for the vice president, which gave him a few minutes to dash a quick note home. "Turn on your radio tomorrow night and you'll hear Harry make a

Jefferson Day address to the nation,” he wrote. “It will be followed by the president, whom I’ll introduce.”

Some 700 miles to the south, at his retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia, President Roosevelt had put the finishing touches on his own Jefferson Day speech. He had been working on it all week, and at one point proudly announced to his guests that he had completed the draft largely in his own hand.

That morning, he sat for a portraitist, who diligently painted while Roosevelt chatted with his friends. Just as their table was being set for lunch, he complained of a sudden and piercing pain in his head. He slumped forward in his chair and never regained consciousness. The two Jefferson Day addresses were never delivered. Truman had intended to conclude his remarks by saying, “The next voice you will hear will be that of the President of the United States.” But the American public never heard that introduction, and they never heard Franklin Roosevelt’s familiar voice again.”<sup>1</sup>



*Unfinished Portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Courtesy National Archives*

The former Senator from Missouri was Vice President for 82 days when Franklin Roosevelt died.

After his swearing in, he was briefed by the Secretary of War about a new weapon. Truman wrote in his diary, “We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world.”

The war cost millions of lives and endless suffering. He was determined to stop the bloodshed.

The atomic bomb was his last resort.

The President insisted the weapon be used on a military target. “I have told the Secretary of War, Mr. Stimson,” Truman wrote, “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, merciless, and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop that terrible bomb on the old capital or the new.”<sup>2</sup>

Three months into his presidency, Truman went to Germany to meet with Churchill and Stalin to decide the future of the postwar world and to establish peace and order and deal with the devastation and suffering. The conference went from July 17<sup>th</sup> to August 2<sup>nd</sup>.



*The swearing in of Harry Truman on the death of Franklin Roosevelt, Courtesy National Archives*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/opinion/roosevelt-truman-jefferson.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.shoppbs.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/truman/psources/ps\\_diary.html](http://www.shoppbs.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/truman/psources/ps_diary.html)

“How I hate this trip,” Truman wrote in his diary on the way to Potsdam. “But I have to make it, win, lose or draw. I am not working for any interest by the Republic of the United States. I am giving nothing away except to save starving people and even then I hope we can help them to help themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

Truman argued for human rights, free elections, industrial reconstruction, efforts to prevent famine, and work to save the millions of refugees, prisoners of war, and homeless wandering through the continent.

During the conference, Truman became suspicious of Stalin and his intentions. The lack of trust effected the outcome.

At Potsdam, “The Big Three” of the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the United States agreed to acknowledge Russian dominance of Eastern Europe; the transfer of millions of refugees to Polish and Soviet administered territories; creation of a Council of Foreign Ministers to deal with peace treaties; promises to introduce representative government in Germany; outlaw of the



*Winston Churchill, Harry Truman and Joseph Stalin at Potsdam, August 2, 1945, Courtesy National Archives*

Nazi Party; accords on reparations and land boundaries; the trial of war criminals and the unconditional surrender of Japan, or face “total destruction.”

Truman informed Stalin of the atom bomb. The Soviet dictator did not seem surprised.

The President departed the conference with concerns and misgivings.

The seeds of the Cold War were planted.

Nazi Germany had been defeated. The Empire of Japan continued to fight in one bloody contest after another.

The island of Okinawa fell on June 21<sup>st</sup>, after three months of vicious combat. 12,000 American lives were lost. Over 100,000 Japanese soldiers perished in the fighting and nearly 100,000 civilians died. For military leaders, it was the shape of things to come.

The war with Japan could last years.



*US Flag raised over the island of Okinawa, June, 1945, Courtesy National Archives*

<sup>3</sup> [https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/\\_/WQHh450I\\_rlajw](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/_/WQHh450I_rlajw)

The Commander in Chief faced a frightening choice. To invade Japan the Allies estimated a million casualties. As many Japanese might die or be wounded in house-to-house combat. 63 million leaflets were dropped across Japan for several months to warn civilians of air raids. 67 Japanese cities were firebombed. Horrible destruction occurred.

Yet the enemy resisted.



*Kamikaze attack on a US Naval Vessel, Courtesy National Archives*

Kamikaze attacks had a powerful psychological impact on US military decision making. 3,800 Japanese pilots died in the suicide attacks, sinking 34 navy ships, and killing 4,900 sailors. It was believed the Japanese would kill themselves before admitting defeat.



*Kamikaze Pilots, Courtesy Japanese National Archives*

Anti-surrender sentiment was strong in the Japanese military.

The founder of the Kamikazes, Vice Admiral Onishi insisted 20 million lives would be sacrificed in a special attack effort against an invasion of Japan.



*U.S. Navy heavy cruiser USS Augusta, 1945 Courtesy US Navy*

flew to England and boarded the *USS Augusta* which had taken him to Europe. King George VI visited him on board as the British and US flags flew over the vessel.

It was August 2, 1945.

He made a decision that day that would thunder across the planet and set in motion the end of the war in the Pacific.

Three days into the voyage, the chaplain held a prayer vigil. Harry Truman was in the forward mess hall of the *Augusta*.

The President prayed his judgement would stop the bloodshed.

Father Curtis Tiernan of the *Augusta* led the sailors and the President in a hymn, "Faith of Our Fathers."



U.S. & British flags on USS Augusta , 1945. Courtesy, National Archives

Evidence pointed to the determination of the enemy not to lay down their arms. Truman was told the Japanese were ready to fight to the end rather than accept capitulation.

After the Potsdam conference, Truman



*President Truman aboard the Augusta, 1945, Courtesy US Navy*



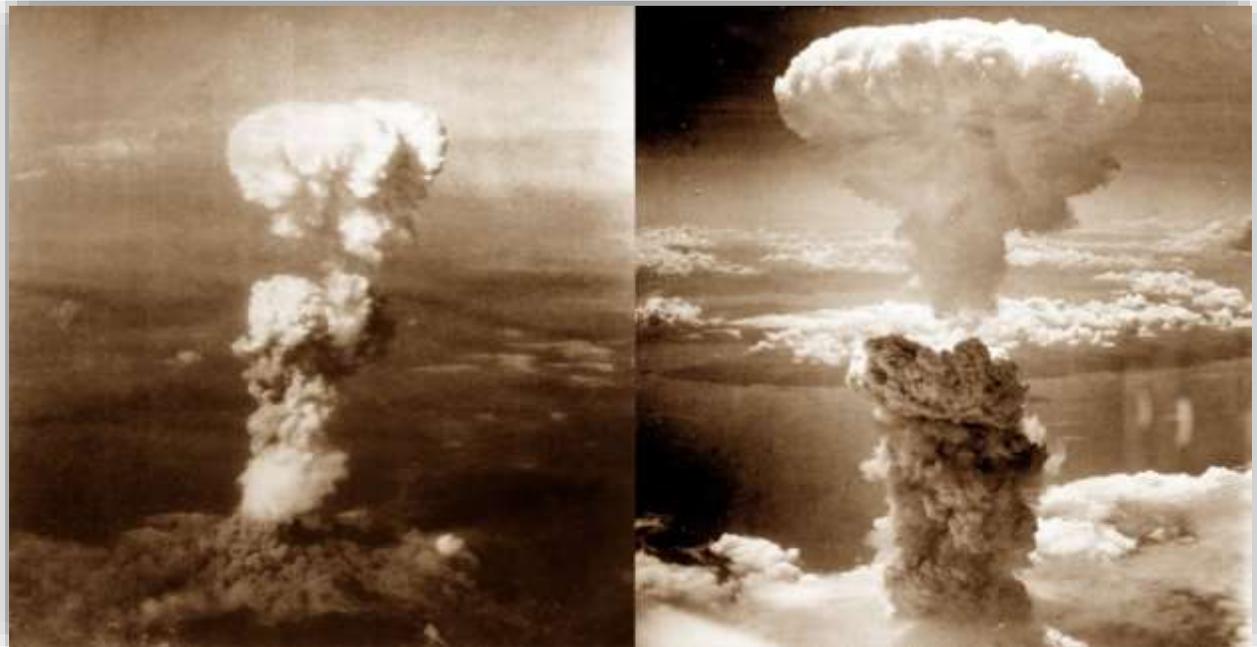
The plane that dropped the first atomic bombs, *The Enola Gay*, August 1945.  
Courtesy, National Archives

As Truman prayed on the deck of the ship, thousands of miles away, a plane named the Enola Gay flew off the island of Tinian toward the Japanese mainland.

It was 2:45 AM.

The city of Hiroshima slept.

It was an industrial center filled with factories and storage facilities for the Japanese war effort. It was also a bustling city with 318,000 men, women, and children.



*Atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, August 1945, courtesy of National Archives*

Early in the morning of August 6, the Enola Gay reached Hiroshima. The sky was clear. There was no anti-aircraft fire. The plane flew placidly across the sky of the city.

At 8:15 AM it dropped the bomb.

Thousands of lives evaporated in seconds.

The tail gunner Bob Caron recalled what happened next:<sup>4</sup>

*It was an awesome sight... the mushroom cloud... was white on the outside and it was sort of a purplish black towards the interior, and it had a fiery red core, and it just kept boiling up.*

*As we got further away, I could see the city... it was being covered with this low, bubbling mass. It looked like... molasses, let's say, spreading out and running up into the foothills... covering the city. Flames in different spots (were) springing up.*

The copilot, Capt. Robert Lewis wrote:

*If I live a hundred years, I'll never quite get these few minutes out of my mind. Everyone on the ship is actually dumbstruck even though we had expected something fierce. I honestly have the feeling of groping for words to explain this or I might say, my God, what have we done?*



Ruins left after the explosion of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima, August 6, 1945 Courtesy. AP

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/heres-how-the-crew-of-the-enola-gay-crew-recalled-the-first-atomic-weapons-attack-in-history-2015-8?IR=T>

The crew members would later say they did not regret the dropping of the bomb. They believed it hastened the culmination of the war and saved thousands of lives on both sides.

“Capt. Theodore ‘Dutch’ Van Kirk, of Northumberland, Pennsylvania, said that ‘I honestly believe the use of the atomic bomb saved lives in the long run, but I pray no man will have to witness that sight again. Such a terrible waste, such a loss of life.’”<sup>5</sup>



Emperor Hirohito. Courtesy, Japanese National Archives

Sixteen hours after the attack on Hiroshima, President Truman called upon the Japanese to stop fighting.

No response.

Two days after the bombing of Hiroshima, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and raided Japanese territory.

The next day, a second nuclear device was unleashed on the city of Nagasaki. 80,000 people died instantly.<sup>6</sup>

The nuclear age was born, along with the possibility of atomic war.

To end the hostilities, the final decision lay in the hands of the Emperor of Japan.

The Emperor wielded more power than originally believed. Historic examples showed Hirohito acting decisively like putting down a coup of military leaders in 1936; approval of the use of chemical weapons after the invasion of China; and tacit

approval of the mistreatment of prisoners of war and the mass murder of civilians in Nanking. He endorsed the alliance with Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany and approved the attack on Pearl Harbor, over the objections of some of his advisors. “According to an aide, he showed visible joy at the news of the success of the surprise attacks.”<sup>7</sup>

The Emperor had a chance to end the war earlier when it was clear Japan could not win. In February, 1945, the Prime Minister implored Hirohito to begin negotiations for an end to the fighting. He refused, on the hope the Soviet Union would mediate a negotiated peace. Preserving the emperor’s office was a key concern of many Japanese officials, which led them to refuse demands for unconditional surrender.

“Hirohito learned of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima about 12 hours after the fact, at 7:50 pm, Japan time, on August 6, 1945. Two days later, the Emperor admitted that the war could not continue. But neither the Emperor nor the Japanese Cabinet accepted unconditional surrender, at that time. On August 9, the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki and the Soviet Union began its invasion of Japanese territory. That night, at a

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: <https://www.businessinsider.com/heres-how-the-crew-of-the-enola-gay-crew-recalled-the-first-atomic-weapons-attack-in-history-2015-8?IR=T>

<sup>6</sup> UShistory.org, “The Decision to Drop the Atom Bomb” (<http://www.ushistory.org/us/51g.asp>)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.atomicheritage.org/profile/emperor-hirohito>

meeting with other leaders, Hirohito declared his intention to accept the Potsdam Declaration.”<sup>8</sup>

It was still not the culmination of the war. Japanese officials continued to debate how imperial power could be maintained. An unsuccessful coup was put down during the discussions by those wanting to continue the struggle.

“Hirohito’s decision proved decisive: his loss of faith in the war effort corralled both politicians and military men who might have prolonged the war. He announced the surrender to the nation in an historic radio broadcast, the first time an Emperor had ever addressed the nation in such a manner. The “Jewel Voice Broadcast,” delivered in formal, florid Japanese, was notable both for what Hirohito did not say—he never used the word ‘surrender’—and what he did say. He both continued to justify Japan’s earlier aggression, and put forth a new national mission that was very different than the ideology of *kodo*. (Subordination of the individual to the state.) ‘To strive for the common prosperity and happiness of all nations as well as the security and well-being of our subjects.’ The Jewel Voice Broadcast also made reference to ‘a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to damage is indeed incalculable.’”<sup>9</sup>



*Vice Admiral Onishi. Courtesy, Japanese National Archives*

Japanese leaders and the Emperor also feared a popular uprising if the conflict did not cease.

Emperor Hirohito ordered the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War to accept the Allied terms of surrender.

The war with Japan ended on August 15, 1945, 95 days after Harry Truman became Commander in Chief.

The day after the Emperor’s decision, Vice Admiral Onishi took his own life rather than give up. “I wish to express my deep appreciation to the souls of the brave special attackers,” he wrote in his suicide note. “They fought and died valiantly with faith in our ultimate victory. In death I wish to atone for my part in the failure to achieve that victory and I apologize to the souls of those dead fliers and their bereaved families.

I wish the young people of Japan to find a moral in my death. To be reckless is only to aid the enemy. You must abide by the spirit of the Emperor’s decision with utmost perseverance. Do not forget your rightful pride in being Japanese.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. <https://www.atomicheritage.org/profile/emperor-hirohito>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. <https://www.atomicheritage.org/profile/emperor-hirohito>

You are the treasure of the nation. With all the fervor of spirit of the special attackers, strive for the welfare of Japan and for peace throughout the world.”<sup>10</sup>



*Japanese Sign Surrender Accord on the Battleship Missouri, September 2, 1945, Courtesy US Navy*

President Truman went on to make other historic decisions like the Marshall Plan to reconstruct Europe, the beginning of the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to protect the free nations of the continent from Soviet aggression.

One year after the tragedy of Hiroshima, Truman created the Atomic Energy Commission for the peaceful use of nuclear power.

Historians, philosophers, and writers still debate the morality and need of such a weapon of mass destruction to end the conflict. Perhaps another President would have taken a different approach.

We will never know.

What we do know is that Truman showed character, courage, decisiveness, and responsibility as well as humility; the marks of a true Commander in Chief.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://ww2db.com/person\\_bio.php?person\\_id=170](https://ww2db.com/person_bio.php?person_id=170)



## Thoughts over the Use of the Atomic Bomb to End the War with Japan

“Some Americans recall the event with shame and express their fervent hope that nuclear weapons never be used again. Others firmly believe that the use of atomic bombs saved American lives by ending the war prior to a bloody American invasion of Japan. More challenging to consider is whether it was an unjustifiable act in a fully justified war.”<sup>11</sup>

Reflection on the morality of the event is expressed in the following thoughts.

*The atomic bomb made the prospect of future war unendurable. It has led us up those last few steps to the mountain pass; and beyond there is a different country.*

— J. Robert Oppenheimer

*As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world — that is the myth of the atomic age — as in being able to remake ourselves.* — Mahatma Gandhi

*There are voices which assert that the bomb should never have been used at all. I cannot associate myself with such ideas. . . . I am surprised that very worthy people—but people who in most cases had no intention of proceeding to the Japanese front themselves—should adopt the position that rather than throw this bomb, we should have sacrificed a million American and a quarter of a million British lives.* — Winston Churchill

*But they (the Japanese) also showed a meanness and viciousness towards their enemies equal to the Huns. Genghis Khan and his hordes could not have been more merciless. I have no doubts about whether the two atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were necessary. Without them, hundreds of thousands of civilians in Malaya and Singapore, and millions in Japan itself, would have perished.* — Lee Kuan Yew, the Former Prime Minister of Singapore

*The intercepts of Japanese Imperial Army and Navy messages disclosed without exception that Japan's armed forces were determined to fight a final Armageddon battle in the homeland against an Allied invasion. The Japanese called this strategy Ketsu Go (Operation Decisive). It was founded on the premise that American morale was brittle and could be shattered by heavy losses in the initial invasion. American politicians would then gladly negotiate an end to the war far more generous than unconditional surrender.* — Richard B. Frank, Historian

*The Japanese code of Bushido—‘the way of the warrior’—was deeply ingrained. The concept of Yamato-damashii equipped each soldier with a strict code: Never be captured, never break down, and never surrender. Surrender was dishonorable. Each soldier was trained to fight to the death and was expected to die before suffering dishonor. Defeated Japanese leaders preferred to take their own lives in the painful samurai ritual of seppuku (called hara kiri in the West). Warriors who surrendered were deemed not worthy of regard or respect.*

— John T. Correll

*Much of the confusion involves the definition of terms like ‘surrender.’ The Japanese did indeed float various schemes to end the war, but on terms that were totally unacceptable to any Allied power. Among other things, these schemes involved no occupation, no dismantling*

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<sup>11</sup> <http://origins.osu.edu/history-news/time-confront-ethics-hiroshima>

*of militarism or imperialism, and no punishment of war criminals. No retaliation for the savage crimes in China, the East Indies, and elsewhere. Then, after a hiatus of a couple years, Japan would launch the next wave of aggression. They were clearly not talking 'surrender' in any sense of the term we might recognize. ... When we consider the toll of not dropping the bombs, always remember the many thousands of civilians who were dying under Japanese occupation in China and Indonesia throughout 1945, and we should continue counting the deaths that would have occurred at that rate through 1946. Nothing was going to stop that short of the total destruction of Japanese war-making capacity. Add to this the murder of all Allied POWs in Japanese hands, as the Japanese had ordered in the event of a direct attack on the mainland. Put those figures together, together with likely Japanese fatalities, you get about ten million dead – and that is a conservative figure. Most of those additional deaths would have been East and Southeast Asians, mainly Japanese and Chinese. – Philip Jenkins*

*In 1945, Secretary of War Stimson, visiting my headquarters in Germany, informed me that our government was preparing to drop an atomic bomb on Japan. I was one of those who felt that there were a number of cogent reasons to question the wisdom of such an act. During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression, and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives.*

– Dwight David Eisenhower

*The Japanese had, in fact, already sued for peace. The atomic bomb played no decisive part, from a purely military point of view, in the defeat of Japan.*

– Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet

*The use of [the atomic bombs] at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons. ... The lethal possibilities of atomic warfare in the future are frightening. My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children.*

– Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy, Chief of Staff to President Truman, 1950

*The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.*

– Major General Curtis Lemay, XXI Bomber Command, September 1945

*The first atomic bomb was an unnecessary experiment . . . . It was a mistake to ever drop it . . . [the scientists] had this toy and they wanted to try it out, so they dropped it.*

– Fleet Admiral William Halsey Jr., 1946

*On the basis of available evidence, however, it is clear that the two atomic bombs . . . alone were not decisive in inducing Japan to surrender. Despite their destructive power, the atomic bombs were not sufficient to change the direction of Japanese diplomacy. The Soviet invasion was. Without the Soviet entry in the war, the Japanese would have continued to fight until numerous atomic bombs, a successful allied invasion of the home islands, or continued aerial bombardments, combined with a naval blockade, rendered them incapable of doing so.*

– Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, Japanese Historian

*Military vulnerability, not civilian vulnerability, accounts for Japan's decision to surrender. Japan's military position was so poor that its leaders would likely have surrendered before invasion, and at roughly the same time in August 1945, even if the United States had not employed strategic bombing or the atomic bomb. Rather than concern for the costs and risks to the population, or even Japan's overall military weakness vis-a-vis the United States, the decisive factor was Japanese leaders' recognition that their strategy for holding the most important territory at issue—the home islands—could not succeed.*

— Robert Pape

*Let me say only this much to the moral issue involved: Suppose Germany had developed two bombs before we had any bombs. And suppose Germany had dropped one bomb, say, on Rochester and the other on Buffalo, and then having run out of bombs she would have lost the war. Can anyone doubt that we would then have defined the dropping of atomic bombs on cities as a war crime, and that we would have sentenced the Germans who were guilty of this crime to death at Nuremberg and hanged them?*

— Leó Szilárd, physicist who played a role in the Manhattan Project



Emilio Iodice is author of the new book, *The Commander in Chief, The Qualities Needed of Leaders of Freedom-Loving Nations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Lessons from American Presidential History*, published by Cranberry Press <http://www.iodicebooks.com/>