**Truman Tells Stalin, July 24, 1945**

**Most of the groups and individuals who had considered the subject — from the Scientific Panel to the writers of the Franck Report — believed it necessary to inform the USSR of the imminent success of the Manhattan project. Failure to do so, they believed, would guarantee a post-war atmosphere of suspicion and hostility.**

**At the Potsdam Conference, however, President Truman chose to tell Stalin only that the U.S. possessed “a new weapon of unusual destructive force.” Truman’s decision raises an obvious question: Since Stalin would learn of the existence of the atomic bomb the day it was used, if he did not know already, what purpose could be served by Truman’s tactic?**

**Truman’s announcement to Stalin can be seen here from the accounts of the various observers. Each describes the same event, but the event appears in a different light to each observer. Did the “master politicians” Truman, Churchill, and Byrnes know what they were doing? Or did they make a tragic blunder?**

**President Truman's version:**

On July 24 I casually mentioned to Stalin that we had a new weapon of unusual destructive force. The Russian Premier showed no special interest. All he said was he was glad to hear it and hoped we would make “good use of it against the Japanese.”

Harry S. Truman, *Year of Decisions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1955) p. 416.

**British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s version:**

I was perhaps five yards away, and I watched with the closest attention the momentous talk. I knew what the President was going to do. What was vital to measure was its effect on Stalin. I can see it all as if it were yesterday. He seemed to be delighted. A new bomb! Of extraordinary power! Probably decisive on the whole Japanese war! What a bit of luck! This was my impression at the moment, and I was sure that he had no idea of the significance of what he was being told. Evidently in his immense toils and stresses the atomic bomb had played no part. If he had the slightest idea of the revolution in world affairs which was in progress his reactions would have been obvious. Nothing would have been easier than for him to say, “Thank you so much for telling me about your new bomb. I of course have no technical knowledge. May I send my expert in these nuclear sciences to see your expert tomorrow morning?” But his face remained gay and genial and the talk between these two potentates soon came to an end. As we were waiting for our cars I found myself near Truman. “How did it go?” I asked. “He never asked a question,” he replied. I was certain therefore that at that date Stalin had no special knowledge of the vast process of research upon which the United States and Britain had been engaged for so long...

Winston Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1953) pp 669-70.

**Secretary of State James Byrnes’ version I:**

At the close of the meeting of the Big Three on the afternoon of July 24, the President walked around the large circular table to talk to Stalin. After a brief conversation the President rejoined me and we rode back to the “Little White House” together. He said he had told Stalin that, after long experimentation, we had developed a new bomb far more destructive than any other known bomb, and that we planned to use it very soon unless Japan surrendered. Stalin’s only reply was to say that he was glad to hear of the bomb and he hoped we would use it. I was surprised at Stalin’s lack of interest. I concluded that he had not grasped the importance of the discovery. I thought that the following day he would ask for more information. He did not. Later I concluded that, because the Russians kept secret their developments in military weapons, they thought it improper to ask us about ours.

James F. Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947) p. 263.

**Secretary of State James Byrnes’ version II:**

I am just as convinced now as I was when I wrote that first book, “Speaking Frankly,” in 1947, that Stalin did not appreciate the significance of the statement. I have read stories by so-called historians who assert that he must have known, but they were not present. I was. I watched Stalin’s face. He smiled and said only a few words, and Mr. Truman shook hands with him, left, coming back to where I was seated and the two of us went to our automobile.

I recall telling the President at the time, as we were driving back to our headquarters, that, after Stalin left the room and got back to his own headquarters, it would dawn on him, and the following day the President would have a lot of questions to answer. President Truman thought that most probable. He devoted some time in talking to me that evening as to how far he could go — or should go.

Stalin never asked him a question about it. I am satisfied that Stalin did not appreciate the significance of President Truman’s statement. I’m pretty certain that they knew we were working on the bomb, but we had kept secret how far that development had gone.

James Byrnes, interview in *U.S. News and World Report*, August 15, 1960 pp 67-68.

**Truman’s Interpreter Charles Bohlen’s version:**

Three days after the successful test blast, after consulting his advisers and Churchill (the British had cooperated in the project), Truman decided it would be wise to tell Stalin the news. Explaining that he wanted to be as informal and casual as possible, Truman said during a break in the proceedings that he would stroll over to Stalin and nonchalantly inform him. He instructed me not to accompany him, as I ordinarily did, because he did not want to indicate that there was anything particularly momentous about the development. So it was Pavlov, the Russian interpreter, who translated Truman’s words to Stalin. I did not hear the conversation, although Truman and Byrnes both reported that I was there.

In his memoirs, Truman wrote that he told Stalin that the United States had “a new weapon of unusual destructive force.” Apparently, the President did not tell Stalin the new weapon was an atomic bomb, and the Soviet leader did not ask or show any special interest. He merely nodded and said something. “All he said was that he was glad to hear it and hoped we would make good use of it against the Japanese,” Truman wrote. Across the room, I watched Stalin’s face carefully as the President broke the news. So offhand was Stalin’s response that there was some question in my mind whether the President’s message had got through. I should have known better than to underrate the dictator. Years later, Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov, in his memoirs, disclosed that that night Stalin ordered a telegram sent to those working on the atomic bomb in Russia to hurry with the job.

Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History 1929-1969* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973) pp. 247-248.

**British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden’s version:**

Mr. Churchill and I had previously discussed together the problem of telling Stalin and, if so, whether before the explosion of the bomb or after. If we did tell him would he ask for the know-how at once? A refusal would be awkward, but inescapable.

There were embarrassments every way, but on balance I was in favour of telling Stalin. My chief argument was that the United States and Britain would have to refuse the secret information. They would be better placed to do this if Stalin had already been told that we possessed this weapon and meant to use it. There was not much to this, but the Prime Minister thought it the better way.

On the question of when Stalin was to be told, it was agreed that President Truman should do this after the conclusion of one of our meetings. He did so on July 24th, so briefly that Mr. Churchill and I, who were covertly watching, had some doubts whether Stalin had taken it in. His response was a nod of the head and a brief “thank you.” No comment.

Anthony Eden, *The Reckoning: The Memoirs of Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) p. 635.

**Soviet Marshal Georgii Zhukov’s version:**

I do not recall the exact date, but after the close of one of the formal meetings Truman informed Stalin that the United States now possessed a bomb of exceptional power, without, however, naming it the atomic bomb.

As was later written abroad, at that moment Churchill fixed his gaze on Stalin’s face, closely observing his reaction. However, Stalin did not betray his feelings and pretended that he saw nothing special in what Truman had imparted to him. Both Churchill and many other Anglo-American authors subsequently assumed that Stalin had really failed to fathom the significance of what he had heard.

In actual fact, on returning to his quarters after this meeting Stalin, in my presence, told Molotov about his conversation with Truman. The latter reacted almost immediately. “Let them. We’ll have to talk it over with Kurchatov and get him to speed things up.”

I realized that they were talking about research on the atomic bomb.

It was clear already then that the US Government intended to use the atomic weapon for the purpose of achieving its Imperialist goals from a position of strength in “the cold war.” This was amply corroborated on August 6 and 8. Without any military need whatsoever, the Americans dropped two atomic bombs on the peaceful and densely-populated Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov, *The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971) pp. 674-675.