

Henry Stimson: The Wartime Statesman

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The late political philosopher John Rawls defined the statesman as an ideal – an individual who exemplified outstanding insight, judgment, courage and leadership in office. The qualities of a statesman, however, did not end there. Such persons were not only capable of leading during times of trial and uncertainty, but also aimed for peace and the well being of future generations. Henry L. Stimson was one such man. His career in public service would span nearly forty years, taking him from the state level attorney up to the highest echelons of the United States (US) government. Though he was not without flaw, Stimson possessed a clear set of values and principles that consistently influenced the decisions that he made throughout his life. A man who was Secretary of War, once at the eve of the First World War and years later during the conflict of the Second World War, Stimson would face issues that would greatly challenge his moral compass and vision for peace. Yet in spite of the grim realities that surrounded him, Stimson led the US through one of the most turbulent times of its history with the heart of a true statesman. Accordingly, this paper will examine Stimson as a wartime statesman in addition to taking a closer look at the lesser-known aspects of his moral dilemmas during his tenure as Secretary of War.

Laying the Foundations:

Henry L. Stimson, born on September 21st 1867, would spend most of his early years in New England. His Presbyterian upbringing along with his education at Yale University and Harvard Law School would be formative towards laying the foundation of his moral compass. As Sean Malloy explains, “ While Presbyterianism provided the moral core of Stimson’s worldview, it was not religious dogma but rather the law from which he drew both his livelihood and the

intellectual framework that guided his approach to national and international affairs.”¹ In other words Stimson would “...embrace the law as a tool for the gradual evolution of human society towards a more perfect moral order.”² This viewpoint would govern the decisions that Stimson would make throughout his illustrious career and demonstrate the faith that he put in international law and order.

After fifteen some years working at a New York corporate law firm, Stimson was tapped by president Theodore Roosevelt to become the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York.³ He would hold this office for three years, during which he continued to cultivate his beliefs in law and strong government.⁴ Following an unsuccessful bid for governor of New York, he was appointed in 1911 as Secretary of War in the Taft cabinet. Although Stimson was technically a Progressive and President Taft a Conservative, Taft knew that Stimson was “a middle-of-the-road progressive, not running to extreme radicalism on one side or to conservatism on the other.”⁵ Accordingly, Stimson would fulfill his new role well by not only advocating for preparedness and successfully reorganizing the US army into a modern fighting force on a par with the emerging global power of the US, but also strengthening US policy towards the development of the various territories under American control such as the Philippines.⁶ As McGeorge Bundy wrote, these two years as Secretary of War under Taft “were the most

¹ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 16.

² Ibid. 17.

³ Ibid. 20.

⁴ Schmitz, David F. *Henry L. Stimson: the First Wise Man*, 14.

⁵ Stimson, Henry L., and McGeorge Bundy. *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 29.

⁶ Schmitz, David F. *Henry L. Stimson: the First Wise Man*, 23-33.

important in his early public life,” preparing him for the momentous time he would be Secretary of War once more.⁷

Following the outbreak of World War I (WWI), in accordance with his belief that “the future of the free institutions of the world” was at stake⁸ and of the military preparedness that he had advocated as secretary of war, Stimson put on the uniform at no less than fifty years of age.⁹ He would serve in an artillery unit, be promoted to the rank of colonel yet see hardly any action.¹⁰ Despite his enthusiasm for service and the “deep and lasting affection” he would foster for his regiment, Stimson’s brief period in the armed forces would only reinforce his distaste for war and its affect on civilization.¹¹ Indeed, following the war, he would be a strong advocate for the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 of which states that signed, promised to never use war as a means for settling disagreements or conflict. Though Stimson noted that though the complete termination of war was likely impossible, to “abolish war as a regular instrument of national policy” was achievable.¹² In his view, international law and institutions along with global compliance, respect and trust, could bring such peace to reality. These ideals would continue to guide Stimson’s decisions and goals especially in regards to atomic energy and the ending of the Second World War.

⁷ Stimson, Henry L., and McGeorge Bundy. *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 55.

⁸ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 89.

⁹ *Ibid.* 91-92.

¹⁰ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 29.

¹¹ Stimson, Henry L., and McGeorge Bundy. *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 94.

[Following the war, Stimson would announce his support for “trying almost anything which may offer any chance to diminish the likelihood of another such catastrophe to civilization as this war.” (Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 30.)]

¹² Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 32.

The end of WWI signaled in some ways the end of an era. The “war to end all wars” had been fought, nations were taking steps towards lasting peace, and the US was entering into an era of prosperity. By this time, there was no doubt that Stimson had already accomplished much, but public service would call him yet again – this time, overseas. From 1927 to 1929, Stimson would support American interests abroad, not only by developing a framework for US military intervention in Nicaragua in order to sustain regional stability, but also by becoming Governor general of the Philippines and strengthening US oversight of the islands¹³ Upon President Hoover’s election to office in 1929, however, Stimson would be summoned from the Philippines to take the position of Secretary of State. It was during this time that his principles and beliefs would especially be challenged by the growing overtures of conflict that would eventually burst into World War II (WWII). In addition, as revealed in his work abroad, Stimson’s belief in the universalism of American values and in the importance of US involvement for the facilitation of stability and peace would continue to reflect in the decisions and dilemmas that he would face. Indeed, the extent of his convictions and principles were revealed internationally when Stimson notably spoke up at the London naval conference of 1930 calling for the outlawing of the submarine as a weapon of war. Stimson would proclaim that this weapon had “revolted the conscience of the world” and wondered “whether in this day and age, and after the experiences of the last war, the nations of this conference are justified in continuing to build these

¹³ Schmitz, David F. *Henry L. Stimson: the First Wise Man*, 50, 62.

[The US would support authoritarian regimes in Nicaragua in order to guarantee stability and to quell nationalist uprisings that it feared would upset economic trade and encourage Bolshevism (p48). Similarly, nationalist sentiment rising in Philippines was considered to hamper US efforts in establishing “...a government suitable to the wants and conditions of the inhabitants...to prepare them for local self-government, and in due time to make such disposition of said islands as will best promote the interests of the citizens of the United States and the inhabitants.” Consequently, the Philippine nationals were not considered to be ready or responsible for such autonomous control (p62).]

instruments of warfare, thereby assuming responsibility for the risk of repeating in any possible future wars the inhumane activities which have been condemned by the verdict of history.”¹⁴

Although Stimson’s speech would fail to lead to the abolition of submarine warfare, it was a moment in which his statesmanship would shine in addition to being a foretaste of the dilemmas that would confront him in the coming years.

As the world steadily progressed towards another war, Stimson would come to shift in his view in regards to using US military intervention overseas to foster peace. Despite his own contributions in carrying out US policy especially in Nicaragua, Stimson would rather turn towards “multilateral political and legal solutions to the problem of war.”¹⁵ While it was evident that Stimson had begun to understand the delicate balance between the effectiveness and limits of force – either military or political, he would face challenges in this regard, especially in light of the expanding control of Japan in Manchuria. While Stimson initially hoped that a combination of international disapproval and pressure would halt Japan’s advances, he would realize that the situation was “rapidly getting bad” and that the US may need to “take a firm ground and aggressive stand toward Japan. It is a very ticklish situation and I am much troubled by it.”¹⁶ Because of the hesitancy of President Hoover to apply economic pressure or any overt action, Stimson would eventually settle on a policy that would come to be known as the Stimson Doctrine. This essentially stated that the US would not recognize any treaty that Japan and China “made under military pressure”.¹⁷ In other words, the US would not recognize any of Japan’s

¹⁴ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 12.

¹⁵ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 108.

gains in China. The significance of this declaration was Stimson's commitment towards international peace and the balance that he attempted to strike. The drawback was that it would virtually have no effect. Japan would withdraw from the League of Nations a year later and the US would refrain from further action until after the election of Franklin Roosevelt.

Looking back from this point, it is not difficult to see how Stimson's principles, vision, and career were formed. Several decades of service had shaped him into an individual not unlike the statesman characterized by John Rawls. He was one who not only understood the effectiveness of united effort, the dangers of overconfidence, and the intricacies of diplomacy, but also realized the challenges towards achieving real peace and the critical importance of fostering a mindset towards the future. Yet despite being someone who was uniquely qualified to step into the office of Secretary of War once more, the coming years would test Stimson to the utmost. He would face political dilemmas as a man who desired peace, yet he understood that force was sometimes the only path towards achieving that peace. He would face moral quandaries that dealt directly with the use of wartime tactics and technology, issues that he had deep convictions on. Furthermore, his personal principles and traits would also play into the narrative. While Stimson's character was affirmed through his moderate "middle-of-the-road" position that President Taft observed and the general respect that was attributed to him across party lines, he also possessed traits that put him squarely in line with the Victorian elite. He believed that the "richer and more intelligent citizens of the country" should be in charge of national affairs and sincerely believed in the inferiority of non-whites and the responsibility of the white man's burden.¹⁸ Yet for all his shortcomings, Stimson and his "wisdom and integrity and selflessness"

¹⁸ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 4.

as described by those who knew him well, would undeniably be visible in the actions that he would take while fulfilling his critical role.¹⁹ In laying out a snapshot of Stimson's life and career before his time as Secretary of War during WWII, this paper has attempted to display the course by which he cultivated his core values and beliefs. In the following section, this paper will focus on three specific aspects of the wartime dilemmas that Stimson faced – dilemmas that stemmed from a clash between his moral compass, world viewpoint, and the realities surrounding him.

The Crucible:

Throughout Stimson's tenure as the US Secretary of War²⁰ during WWII, his goals and decisions were encapsulated by his vision to achieve peace and sustain it. This is evident from the very beginning of the war from when Stimson was a strong advocate for the end of US isolationism and neutrality prior to its entrance into the war. The reasons were twofold: First, he realized that appeasement against Germany or Japan was not a path towards peace. Such a stance in the face of belligerency would only lead to another terrible war.²¹ Second, Stimson did not believe that neutrality could prevent war in a world that was as greatly interconnected. "War is no longer a contest between two nations which the rest of the world can stand by and look at... People who think they can stand aside and can look at war from a distance without ultimately becoming involved... are not realists but dreamers."²² The sparks were already flying; neutrality would not stem the tide of war that only firm action at the onset of conflict could have done. Stimson's seeming call for war may appear to be a departure from his efforts to facilitate a structure for international peace, yet his desire to confront the Germans and Japanese, came from his

¹⁹ Ibid. 5.

²⁰ From 1940 -1945.

²¹ Schmitz, David F. *Henry L. Stimson: the First Wise Man*, 126.

²² Ibid. 123.

understanding that “the prosperity of each is dependent on the prosperity of all and that in the long run no nation can develop its own national well-being at the expense of its neighbors.”²³

Thus it was to achieve peace that Stimson would appeal the US to take action. The duty of America was not to detach itself from world affairs, but to actively “do her part” to “prevent that war [great war] from taking place” even if it potentially required force.²⁴

Though the US implemented the lend-lease act with its allies, it stopped short of declaring war. This changed with the attack on Pearl Harbor and the “great war” that Stimson had hoped would never occur again, was now in full scale. While Stimson was relieved that the US would stand up to aggressive behavior, his main concern would now be to end it as swiftly as possible. Yet, the coming years were not going to be easily navigated. As the war progressed and wartime technology increasingly grew more powerful and indiscriminate, Stimson would be confronted with dilemmas in regards to his moral code and desire for victory. Moreover, with the dawn of nuclear weapons, he saw that these issues of morality and technology would not be limited to ending the war, but also be critical to global peace and cooperation following the war. Consequently, it would be these three aspects - technology, morality, and a vision for peace - that would play a critical part in Stimson’s wartime narrative and truly test his statesmanship.

WWII was by far the greatest conflict in human history with an estimated number of casualties ranging upwards of 70 million with approximately 34 million that of civilians.²⁵ This was a war that changed the trajectory of warfare not only because of the sheer number of people that were

²³ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 34.

²⁴ Schmitz, David F. *Henry L. Stimson: the First Wise Man*, 124.

²⁵ <https://www.secondworldwarhistory.com/world-war-2-statistics.php>.

affected, but through the introduction of wartime technology that would contribute to this appalling number. One of the notable characteristics of this war was its use of aircraft and the evolution of bombing strategies throughout its length, eventually ending with the use of atomic weapons. This began with high altitude bombing that evolved with the introduction of technology such as the B17 and B29 bombers. This strategy was developed with the aim to reduce bomber losses and while it was used extensively for much of the war, it was not very precise and fairly ineffective unless conducted in large numbers. As the war continued to rage on, bombing strategy would slowly move from high-altitude to low-altitude techniques. While high-altitude bombing was deadly to non-combatants because accuracy was slim, low-altitude techniques were usually conducted with a deliberate targeting of urban areas that were not necessarily military-related.²⁶ Thus as targeting priorities slowly broadened to include non-military targets, tactics towards improving the effectiveness such strikes would also evolve. This would be evident in the bombing of London, Hamburg, and Dresden. The low-altitude incendiary bombing led by General Curtis LeMay against Japan, however, would become the epitome of destruction. It was in this manner of “natural” escalation that the atomic bomb would be considered no different than any other weapon and legitimate for use. To be sure, the bomb employed top-secret technology and was exceptionally expensive, but those in charge of its production and use would hardly question it as a tool of war. Indeed, this bomb would clearly indicate the extent to which wartime technology had developed and the degree of destruction that escalated with it.

²⁶ [This was due to the fact that by the time the Army Air Forces switched to low-altitude strategies, urban areas were already being deliberately targeted.]

Stimson's view on wartime technology was always tied to his desire for peace. WWI introduced him to the horrors of war and as he would say years later, "...the glory of war departed when they abolished the horse."²⁷ Stimson was not adverse to technology if it helped further peaceful goals however. Following the development of the B-17 strategic bomber in 1941, Stimson would hail it as a deterrent for preventing the outbreak of war due to its supposed ability to precision bomb the enemy from long-ranges. The aircraft, however, would not prove to be as capable and the Japanese would still attack Pearl Harbor without fear of US bombing capabilities. Likewise, Stimson supported the research and creation of the atomic bomb, as he believed it could be a possible solution towards ending the war. Yet, it does not mean that Stimson was naïve about technology or its effects. Just as he considered the submarine a weapon that was "susceptible to abuse" and that nations would "be under strong temptation, perhaps irresistible temptation," to use it "in the way that is most effective for immediate purposes, regardless of consequences," Stimson would deem the bomb as "a most terrible thing" that as time went on would deeply concern him to the point that he would attempt to seriously explore alternatives to the use of the bomb.²⁸

Consequently, Stimson was very aware of this continued development of wartime technology and how it challenged the concept of morality. As Secretary of War, Stimson was thrust into the thick of the US's wartime strategy and this brought him face to face with issues that conflicted with his moral principles. Stimson was already known within the US government as a man who followed his convictions. While Secretary of State, he had shut down a secret department that was devoted to intercepting diplomatic cables between foreign nations and its embassies.

²⁷ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 30.

²⁸ Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, Nov 6, 1941.

Stimson would state that gentlemen “do not read each other’s mail” and that doing so was wrong and only eroded the trust between nations, thus endangering peace.²⁹ Though this action likely stemmed in part from personal convictions, Stimson also had a clear vision for peace and was not afraid of implementing what he believed was necessary despite the possibility of fallout. He also believed that it was imperative that the US hold as much as possible, the moral high ground throughout the conflict. While this was vital for wartime effort and public support, Stimson considered the US’s reputation for fair play and humanitarianism as a critical asset for peace in the future.³⁰ Knowing that future peace depended heavily on US involvement and that other nations would likely be following its lead, conducting the war in a manner that was morally justifiable was imperative.

Finding the balance, however, between morality and an effort to end the war would not be easy. As the war progressed, the weight of the balance increasingly shifted towards ending the war as soon as possible. At the onset of the war, targeting civilians through aerial bombing or other means was seen as highly immoral by both sides, yet as time went on, it would be considered as a legitimate means towards achieving victory and peace.³¹ The previously defined lines would begin to blur following the use of high altitude bombing techniques that made precision bombing virtually impossible along with a shift in belief that the psychological impact of bombing cities could break down the morale of a belligerent government.³² For Stimson, such strategy – though

²⁹ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 35.

³⁰ Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, May 16, 1945.

³¹ [The bombing of London by the Luftwaffe, Allied strikes against cities such as Dresden, and the firebombing of Japanese cities by USAAF would constitute some of the largest civilian bombing campaigns of the war.]

³² [In spite of the development of the Norden bombsight that was hailed as the solution for high altitude bombing, its performance was overall disappointing in real battle scenarios.]

possibly contributing to a speedier victory, worried him greatly. He would write to a friend that he was concerned “that the terrible character of modern bombing would render our people callous and brutal. I have feared that the poor people of France and Italy would therefore be unable to distinguish our work from that of the Axis brutalities which we denounce and are fighting against.” Yet, even Stimson himself, would not be completely immune to the effects of the gradual callousing towards the atomic bomb. He didn’t fully grasp the underlying momentum that was rapidly pushing the production of the bomb in addition to the fact that the weapon had already become optimized for use against cities at this point.³³ The atomic bomb was an issue that was greater and more dangerous than Stimson ever thought it would be. A moral threshold had been crossed somewhere and his initial willingness to find peace even through technology capable of terrible destruction may have contributed to this.

On March 5th 1945, Stimson conversed with his assistant Harvey Bundy in regards to the bomb. He would write that their talk “went right down to the bottom facts of human nature, morals, and government, and it is by far the most searching and important thing that I have had to do since I have been here in the office of secretary of war because it touches matters which are deeper even than the principle of the present government.”³⁴ He knew that the US was “...up against some very big decisions” and that time was running out.³⁵ Stimson’s dilemma in the months leading up to the dropping would be to figure out a way to end the war and avoid invasion. If war continued, the only questions would be on *how* to use the bomb, not *should* we use the bomb. Indeed,

³³ [This particular disconnect, as Malloy writes about, probably came from the fact that many of these practical and technical decisions about the bomb were being made by lower-level individuals. (Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 68.)

³⁴ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 63.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 63.

Stimson faced this very matter two months later when the Targeting Committee (mostly made up of military and scientific personnel) finalized their atomic bomb target recommendations of Kyoto, Hiroshima, and Niigata on May 28th 1945³⁶. In his book, *On Active Service*, Stimson paints a rather clear-cut picture in regards to his decision to take Kyoto off the target list.

“With President Truman’s warm support I struck off the list of suggested targets the city of Kyoto. Although it was a target of considerable military importance, it had been the ancient capital of Japan and was a shrine of Japanese art and culture. We determined that it should be spared...”³⁷

While this account seems to point to Stimson’s rejection as stemming from a valiant effort towards preservation or a demonstration of moral fortitude, could there not be other underlying reasons for this decision? J.M. Kelly, who looks at Stimson’s reasoning behind the Kyoto decision in his essay, examines a number of views that have been forwarded in regards to this.³⁸ A moralistic view includes claims that Stimson, having visited Kyoto in the past, did not wish to see it incinerated. Similarly, others including Barton Bernstein, argued that Stimson attempted to address his own conflicted moral qualms by sparing the city.³⁹ The strategic view, of which Kelly tends to agree with, rests on the idea that Stimson’s decision primarily came from geopolitical concerns. On July 24th, Stimson held a meeting with Truman and during it would re-affirm the decision for the sparing of Kyoto, by acknowledging that “...the bitterness which

³⁶ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 105.

³⁷ Stimson, Henry L., and McGeorge Bundy. *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 625.

³⁸ Kelly, Jason M. “Why did Henry Stimson Spare Kyoto from the Bomb: Confusion in Postwar Historiography.”

³⁹ *Ibid.* 191.

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.⁴⁰ Though the reasoning behind the “wanton act” is not made clear, the discussion seems to indicate that Stimson believed that destroying Kyoto would make post-war reconciliation efforts difficult. Stimson likely knew that Kyoto was initially chosen as a target because it not only had growing military value, but also because the people of Kyoto were considered to be “highly intelligent” and thus better able to appreciate the power of the bomb.⁴¹ Furthermore, Kyoto was a prime target to demonstrate the effects of the bomb given that it had deliberately been untouched by the bombing campaign, something that Stimson knew suited the purpose of demonstrating the power of the bomb.⁴² Yet, Stimson somehow seemed to have felt that the military benefits of bombing Kyoto were negligible in some way compared to avoiding the bitterness and difficulty that could stem from the bombing of the ancient capitol. In the end, however, whether Stimson’s Kyoto decision was morally or strategically based or a combination of both, it may never be fully known. What is clear is that Stimson would prevent multiple attempts by General Groves to re-add Kyoto to the target list and ultimately showed his effort to continue the search for the best means to end the war.⁴³

⁴⁰ Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, July 24, 1945.

⁴¹ (Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 116.), (Kelly, Jason M. “Why did Henry Stimson Spare Kyoto from the Bomb: Confusion in Postwar Historiography, 195.), (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33755182>).

⁴² [Stimson’s June 6th entry mentions the he told Truman that he was “a little fearful that before we could get ready [the bomb] the Air Force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon would not have a fair background to show its strength.” These words came right after he said he “did not want to have the United States get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities” specifically in regards to the area bombing that was being conducted. In this, the reader can see Stimson’s moral struggle yet potentially dangerous acceptance of the bomb as a weapon to end the war (Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, June 6, 1945).

⁴³ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 134.

The Interim Committee meeting of May 31st would prove to be pivotal to the narrative of Stimson's wartime dilemmas. The Secretary of War would essentially agree to the deliberate targeting of an urban area with the atomic bomb, despite his insistence throughout the meeting that civilians not be targeted.⁴⁴ A combination of bureaucratic pressure and possibly self-deception over the targeting of "a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by worker's houses" would lead to Stimson's acquiescence on this matter.⁴⁵ Stimson would finally comprehend that the bomb's full potential could not be realized without a shocking psychological blow and as he himself expressed how "man's capability for technological innovation had outstripped 'its moral and social power,'" there was no way around the clash between his principles and the use of the bomb.

⁴⁴ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 114. [It is interesting to note that it is possible that Stimson did not know at this time the extent to which the bombing campaign against Japan was already targeting urban areas and civilians. In his memorandum to the president on May 16, 1945, he mentions his desire "to hold our Air Force, so far as possible, to the 'precision' bombing which it has done so well in Europe. I am told that it is possible and adequate" (Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, May 16, 1945). By this time, General Curtis LeMay had already switched tactics to incendiary area bombing. However, on June 1st, Stimson would note in his journal that discussed with General Arnold about the bombing campaign against Japan. He would write:

"I told him of my promise from Lovett that there would be only precision bombing in Japan and that the press yesterday had indicated a bombing of Tokyo which was very far from that. I wanted to know what the facts were. He told me that the Air Force was up against the difficult situation arising out of the fact that Japan, unlike Germany, had not concentrated her industries and that on the contrary they were scattered out and were small and closely connected in site with the houses of their employees; that thus it was practically impossible to destroy the war output of Japan without doing more damage to civilians connected with the output than in Europe. He told me, however, that they were trying to keep it down as far as possible." (Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, June 1, 1945).

It is difficult to tell whether this indicates that certain information may not have reached Stimson or was withheld from him. Regardless, one can see the concern that Stimson demonstrated over the bombing campaigns.]

⁴⁵ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 115.

In a sense, what Stimson faced here can be seen as self-inflicted, likely coming from a lack of proper attention from the very beginning of the bomb's existence. His initial reaction was to call the bomb "a most terrible thing";⁴⁶ yet he seemed not to consider *in time* the practical, technical, and ultimately important questions that could have adequately alerted him to the reality surrounding the bomb's use. Even up until May 16th, as mentioned in his memorandum to the president, Stimson believed that the US should uphold its "reputation...for fair play and humanitarianism..." and thus sought "that the same rule of sparing the civilian population should be applied as far as possible to use of any new weapons."⁴⁷ Momentum, however, had progressed to the point that turning back was essentially impossible. Nevertheless, in the months following the Interim Committee meeting, Stimson would labor to bring the war to a diplomatic close without the use of the bomb.

Over the course of the three months before the end of the war, Stimson would focus his efforts on various issues connected to the atomic bomb: May - targeting and use, June – exploring alternative diplomatic options, Early July – softening the surrender terms, and at Potsdam (mid-late July) - clarification of the terms. It was his July 2nd memorandum⁴⁸, however, that clearly encapsulated his thoughts and possible solutions to the dilemma that was in front of him. It is in this note that Stimson's statesmanship shines through. The most notable aspects are as follows:

1. Create an alternative to invasion (and dropping of the bomb), by finding a way for Japan to reach "the equivalent of unconditional surrender."

⁴⁶ Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, Nov 6, 1941.

⁴⁷ Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, memorandum to the president May 16, 1945.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

2. Providing ample warning in the name of all allies including the Soviet Union of what is to come if Japan doesn't capitulate.
3. Japan "is susceptible to reason" and isn't a nation composed wholly of mad fanatics of an entirely different mentality..."⁴⁹
4. Liberal leaders exist (as apposed to Germany) under the surface and can aid in reconstruction.
5. Not to destroy Japan's armies or population as it will only produce "race solidity and antipathy."
6. To build up a Japan that will become a "useful member of the future Pacific community."
7. To include the possibility of a constitutional monarchy under the present dynasty in order to add to the chance of acceptance.
8. "Bombing should be confined to military objectives as far as possible."

As shown, a clear outline of Stimson's thought process is seen beginning with his desire to end the war with a minimal loss of life on both sides. Though unconditional surrender of Japan's war-making capabilities and leadership was still the goal, Stimson was attempting to find the best means to it. He also shows insightful understanding of Japan as a nation and as a people, having not only spent time in Asia, but also in Japan and with its people. Furthermore, Stimson's vision for post-war peace is well defined by his desire to not punish Japan needlessly, but facilitate a future peace through the possible retention of the Emperor. He strongly believed that the unconditional surrender policy would hamper peace efforts and thus would advocate, at the very least, for the clarification of the emperor's status upon surrender. He also saw the potential that Japan held for democratic reform and made a clear distinction between Germany and

⁴⁹ [Interesting to note that in regards to the internment of Japanese-American citizens a couple years earlier, he had said, "their racial characteristics are such that we cannot understand or trust even the citizen Japanese...." (Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, Feb 10, 1942).]

Japan's governmental situation saying that he did not believe that the US needed to fundamentally re-shape "the government of [Japan] as a whole in any such manner as we are committed in Germany. I am afraid we would make a hash of it if we tried."⁵⁰ Finally at the end of the memorandum, he once again makes his moral stance clear by specifically mentioning bombing objectives. It is curious that Stimson would include this last part, seemingly like an afterthought. He surely knew the extent of civilian deaths from the incendiary campaigns that were still ongoing, yet he possibly still chose to hold on to a belief that the US was doing its best not to target civilians despite the deliberate bombing of urban areas. At the very least, the Secretary of War was apparently unable to put to rest the clash between his personal principles and the reality of what was occurring.

It should be noted that, sometime in these final months, Stimson would mull over the potential diplomatic power of the atomic bomb especially in regards to the Soviet Union. Though he was one of the very few individuals in the US government at that time, who was concerned with the future implications of this weapon, he was also quite aware of its prospects as a trump card and a means for making a powerful statement. This created the temptation to formulate its use and future around this fact.⁵¹ Up to this point, Stimson had been advocating for the future collective control of atomic weapons alongside the international community and especially the Soviet Union. This stemmed from his realization that humanity had crossed the Rubicon with the development of atomic weapons, leading him to believe that the only way to counter future misuse of such weapons was through open, international control. Yet, he would vacillate during the Potsdam Conference and advise Truman not to divulge details on the bomb during the

⁵⁰ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 101.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 110-11.

conference, despite him advocating for it previously. The reason behind his switch in opinion was his brief hope that it might be possible to extract concessions from Stalin in exchange for information on the bomb, in addition to his increasing distrust of the Soviets and worry that successful international control of the bomb alongside them was slim.⁵² Accordingly this became the other facet of Stimson's dilemma over the bomb – one that directly challenged his diplomatic statesmanship and showed the numerous issues that he had to face in his position. Following the end of the war, Stimson would reevaluate his opinions and once again put his faith in international cooperation.⁵³

In the final weeks of the war, Stimson's dilemmas would shift to the post-war future of atomic weapons. His July 2nd memorandum suggestions of mentioning the fate of the Emperor and having the Soviets sign the warning to Japan would not be included in the final draft of the Potsdam Declaration and following the successful testing of the atomic bomb on July 16th 1945, the final countdown to its wartime use would begin. Two atomic bombs would be dropped on August 6th and 9th respectively. On the 9th, Stimson released a memorandum for the press:

“Great events have happened. The world is changed and it is time for sober thought.

It is natural that we should take satisfaction in the achievements of our science, our industry, and our Army in creating the atomic bomb, but any satisfaction we may feel

⁵² Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 133.

⁵³ [“...in the beginning I was inclined to think that we ought to hang onto the bomb as long as possible and its secrets; but that gradually I had found that I was wrong and that that would be by far the more dangerous course than to make an effort with Russia particularly to get on terms with us of confidence in which we would eliminate the manufacture of such bombs for war purposes...” (Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries* Sept 17, 1945).]

must be overshadowed by deeper emotions. The result of the bomb is so terrific that the responsibility of its possession and its use must weigh heavily on our minds and on our hearts...no American can contemplate what Mr. Churchill has referred to as ‘this terrible means of maintaining the rule of law in the world’ without a determination that after this war is over this great force shall be used for the welfare and not the destruction of mankind.”⁵⁴

His heart for the future of the world - a world inaugurated in nuclear fury under his watch – is palpable. The emotion evidenced here is the culmination and essence of what Stimson wrestled with especially in the final years of the war. He ends it with a plea to the American people that such a tragedy never happen again. Following the blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Stimson would urge Truman on the 10th that the “humane” thing to do while waiting for an official surrender from Japan was to stop the bombing.⁵⁵ Truman would halt the use of atomic bombs, but continue conventional bombing on the note that the US and Japan were still at war. Within several days, the final negotiations would take place and the war would officially come to a close with the signing of the surrender documents taking place on September 2nd.

Though the war was over and Stimson had turned in his resignation due to health reasons, he would continue to advocate his vision of the collective control of atomic energy up until his last day in office. This was an issue that he knew was of utmost importance, especially with the antagonism and rivalry between the US and Soviet Union that was beginning to show its face. He would write to Truman that it was imperative that an agreement between the two nations over

⁵⁴ Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries* Aug 9, 1945.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Aug 10, 1945.

atomic energy be reached in this regard – “one that has some chance of being kept and saving civilization not for five or for twenty years, but forever.”⁵⁶ Stimson believed that “...the only way you can make a man trustworthy is to trust him; and the surest way to make him untrustworthy is to distrust him.”⁵⁷ His life motto, Stimson felt that this was even more applicable in the uncertain landscape of the post-war atomic period. Incidentally, this would be the topic that Stimson would present on in his final cabinet meeting in the White House.

Assessing Stimson

While Henry Stimson is a man who is often overshadowed by the presidential legacy of Roosevelt and Truman, he was a true wartime statesman who served behind the scenes, leading the US with remarkable vision for close to four decades. As Secretary of War, he was leader who was not only committed to US goals, but also successful in achieving them. He would stand at the frontlines of the conflict against aggression, sanctioning the research of nuclear weapons in order to protect the US from potential destruction, while also exploring the diplomatic aspects of the bomb especially in regards to the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, even though Stimson was surrounded by and accustomed to war, he was also an individual of peace and principle who wrestled with the wartime matters he faced in office. Due to the forward momentum and his own conflicted opinions on issues that he inherited from the Roosevelt administration such as the Manhattan Project⁵⁸ and the unconditional surrender policy, Stimson would not fundamentally alter the course of these issues. Yet, it is difficult to deny that

⁵⁶ Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, memorandum to the president Sept 11, 1945.

⁵⁷ Stimson, Henry L., and McGeorge Bundy. *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 644.

⁵⁸ The name for the atomic bomb project.

he worked tirelessly to stay on top of the enormous wartime load, despite suffering from insomnia or headaches that likely stemmed from the pressure of the dilemmas he faced.⁵⁹

Stimson was not perfect; he was a man with clear faults and shortcomings. His elitist perspective and underlying prejudices would blemish his work overseas and in the US, most notably in his support for the incarceration of Japanese-American citizens during the war.⁶⁰ His role in this cannot be overlooked, as it was a serious tragedy that affected 117,000 people, 70,000 of them US citizens.⁶¹ Despite his effort to hasten the surrender of Japan and prevent the use of the atomic bombs if possible, he would ultimately fail due to a combination of his misjudgment over the momentum of the project in addition to possible self-deception over the targeting of the atomic bombs. He was not a perfect wartime statesman, yet one nevertheless. He was a statesman dedicated to peace throughout his long career. His efforts to work towards peaceful solutions in order to avoid war were demonstrated throughout his time as Secretary of State and of War. Once war began, he worked tirelessly to end it as swiftly as possible for the sake of both sides. He also realized the dangers of bitterness that could emerge from the use of force or the excessive punishment of a nation following its surrender. This was evident in his criticism for the

⁵⁹ [The night after his conversation with Groves in regards to striking Kyoto from the target list, Stimson would mention, “having a pretty barbaric night so far as sleeping was concerned.” In general, his often reference to a good nights sleep in his journal can likely indicate that insomnia was normal for him. (Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, May 30, 1945., Sept 6 1945).]

⁶⁰ [He would write the following in his diary: “I also spent some time with McCloy cleaning up a number of things which we both had been working on. We went over the maps of the west coast where General DeWitt is anxious to have the Japanese evacuated from large areas. It is a difficult proposition for the most dangerous elements are not the aliens but the second generation citizens. The second generation Japanese can only be evacuated either as part of a total evacuation, giving access to the areas only by permits, or by frankly trying to put them out on the ground that their racial characteristics are such that we cannot understand or trust even the citizen Japanese. This latter is the fact but I am afraid it will make a tremendous hole in our constitutional system to apply it...” (Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, Feb 10, 1942).]

⁶¹ <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation>

Morgenthau plan that called for converting post-war Germany to an agriculturally based country, a move that would have only sown further seeds of resentment. In the same manner, he was an ardent supporter for the retention of the Emperor in order to ease the post-war occupation of Japan. Yet, his early foundations in law solidified his belief in the significance of serving justice where it was due. This was apparent in his positive view⁶² of the Nuremberg Trials saying that it was “the best piece of international work that has been done since the war.”⁶³ He believed that the trials demonstrated international law and order and sent a warning to those who tried to challenge it. Furthermore, the fact that “planning...or waging...a war of aggression in violation of international treaties,” was considered a crime at the hearings gave him hope that the essence of the Kellogg-Briand Pact would live on regardless of its failure to prevent war.⁶⁴

It is interesting to note that in the same way that Stimson’s background in law would display itself, Stimson’s religious beliefs would also emerge at times throughout his ordeal. During the midst of the atomic bomb dilemma, Stimson would jot a note his aide, Harvey Bundy, saying “as a result of the emotions stirred up by the war we could have never been in a worse condition to handle the impact of this discovery [atomic bomb]...” and would further wonder if it may be a wise idea to acquire a minister who could aid in this and “bring about a spiritual revival of

⁶² [Stimson’s enthusiasm for the trials is further shown in this excerpt from a letter that he wrote to chief US prosecutor at the trials, Robert H. Jackson: “Throughout this past winter I have followed with the keenest interest your work at the trial of the Nazi war criminals in Nurnberg. Since the organization was started in Washington over a year ago, I have felt that its successful consummation was one of the most important efforts which could be carried out at the close of the war. Not only will it make a lasting record of the evils which America has fought to suppress, but it will lift the world a long step nearer to the rule of justice and righteousness...seldom has such an opportunity come to a statesman in a great war, and never has the opportunity been more effectively grasped and carried through towards fruition. (Stimson, Henry L. *Microfilm Edition of the Papers of Henry Lewis Stimson*. Yale University Library).]

⁶³ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 178.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 179.

Christian principles.”⁶⁵ After the war, he would write to Reverend Howard M. Lehn in regards to the difficulty in accomplishing international control of atomic weaponry saying that the “only solution which I can see for the terrible problems which we are now facing must come through a recognition of the authority of our Lord in the universe and the inculcation and development of the spirit taught by Jesus Christ.”⁶⁶ For Stimson, however, his faith was to be best exemplified through the moral principles he cultivated and as Malloy puts it, he “never embraced religious dogma, asserting rather that faith should serve as an inspiration to develop practical solutions to the problems of the world.”⁶⁷

Without doubt, Stimson utilized his faith-based moral code to address the challenging issues that faced him. What is significant, however, is while many know that Stimson was Secretary of War or head of the Manhattan project, few realize the moral dilemmas that one of the most important individuals for US wartime policy, would struggle with. This clearly included his wariness of wartime technology and his stand against the degradation of moral principles within warfare. More critically, however, it was his lifelong concern of the moral future of the world and his labors for the sake of a peaceful future generation that set Stimson apart from the other leaders. His efforts towards facilitating international cooperation and the creation of a sustainable framework for harmony after WWI, was a testament to this vision and with the introduction of weapons that could destroy mankind, Stimson’s foresight would especially become evident in his innate understanding of the far-reaching possibilities and consequences of atomic energy in the future. Throughout his time as Secretary of War, he would allude to the great responsibility that

⁶⁵ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 64.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 178.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

the world and the US in particular had in front of them. Indeed, Stimson opened the 1945 May 31st Interim meeting with the following words: “this project [atomic weapons] should not be considered simply in terms of military weapons, but as a new relationship of man to the universe...” the bomb “...must be controlled if possible to make it an assurance of future peace rather than a menace to civilization.”⁶⁸

It was ultimately this vision for achieving peace and sustaining it that guided Stimson through the dilemmas that challenged his moral compass and world viewpoint. He would not address them all perfectly and this failure to do so contributed to the wartime escalation that he would witness that eventually carried the US over a certain moral threshold, leading to the firebombing of sixty cities and the dropping of two nuclear weapons over Japan. Nevertheless, Stimson’s statesmanship and desire for peace is evident throughout his lengthy public service and particularly during his tenure as Secretary of War. Truly, he would permanently face the paradox of being a man surrounded by war, yet devoted to peace. Perhaps, Stimson put it best when he remarked, “it was very singular that I, the man who had charge of the Department which did the killing in the war, should be the only one who seemed to have any mercy for the other side.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Malloy, Sean L. *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan*, 113.

⁶⁹ Stimson, Henry L. *The Stimson Diaries*, Sept 5, 1944.

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Final Thoughts

In putting together this paper, while I would read a number of books on Henry Stimson, none would be as helpful to me than Sean Malloy's *Atomic Tragedy*. He provided an in-depth look at the moral dilemmas and issues that Stimson wrestled with, painting him as a man who was both exceptional yet flawed. David Schmitz's biography on Stimson would deliver a refreshing overview of Stimson's whole life and career, filling in little details and anecdotes that were missing in some of the other books. Reading Stimson's own book *On Active Service* was intriguing and offered a different perspective to my research just as his extensive journal entries and various memorandums and papers would provide. These were critical to bringing a sense of authenticity to this paper and provided a fascinating read of the day-to-day life of Stimson. The rest of the other books and articles, both provided background information in addition to supporting certain sections of this paper. Finally, many thanks to Dr. Pyle for facilitating and leading the Hiroshima class. I learned invaluable information and developed new perspectives to one of the most pivotal events of the 20th century. Without this class, I would not have been able to write this paper.

- Daniel White