

"The release of atomic energy constitutes a new force too revolutionary to consider in the framework of old ideas."  
—Harry S. Truman.

## TRUMAN AT POTSDAM: HIS SECRET DIARY

BARTON J. BERNSTEIN

On July 7, 1945, accompanied by advisers and armed with briefing papers, President Harry S. Truman departed on the *Augusta* for the Potsdam meeting with Premier Joseph Stalin and Prime Minister Winston Churchill. It was Truman's first trip abroad as president and, in fact, his first trip across the Atlantic since soldiering in World War I. "It was a wonderful crossing" on the *Augusta*, he later recalled, citing the fine band, the nightly movies, and the many ceremonies.

The conference was Truman's first meeting with Stalin and Churchill. It was an opportunity for him to assess them, to test himself, and to be tested by them. Only thirteen weeks in the presidency when the conference opened, he was anxious and uncertain. Neither his years as senator nor his months as vice-president had adequately prepared

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him to deal with foreign policy. Not until he became president in April, for example, had he even learned of the secret Yalta agreements or of the significance of the Manhattan Project, code name for the A-bomb project.

Despite Churchill's entreaties in the spring for an earlier meeting of the Big Three, Truman had delayed the conference, at least partly because he wanted to know the results of the A-bomb test. He arrived at Potsdam on the 15th, but not until the next evening did he receive the brief report that the test at Alamogordo had been successful. "Operated on this morning," was the message in code, "diagnosis not yet complete but results seem satisfactory and already exceed expectations." According to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, who carried the message to the president, he "kept it [and was] delighted with it."

Between July 17th and August 2, Truman, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, General George C. Marshall, army chief of staff, and other American officials met with British and Soviet leaders to dis-

cuss the war with Japan and the shape of the peace. The meetings revealed the growing Soviet-American differences, and the issues of Eastern Europe caused grave problems. In fact, the powers could not reach any comfortable settlement on these issues. Stalin refused to accede to Truman's demand for the immediate reorganization of the Balkan governments, the inclusion of significant democratic elements, and free elections. Stalin pointed out that Russia was not meddling in Greece, a British sphere of influence, and indicated that he wanted a Soviet sphere in the Balkans. American efforts to secure free and democratic elections in Communist-dominated Poland were sidestepped with a loose agreement that elections would be held "as soon as possible."

Truman periodically insisted upon internationalization of European waterways and especially the Danube, which, he argued, would prevent future wars. Stalin, ever fearful of American penetration of Eastern Europe, retaliated by suggesting internationalization of the Suez Canal. The result, as so often

during the conference, was to send the dispute to the newly created Council of Foreign Ministers.

The three powers reached a limited, uneasy agreement on German reparations and some other key issues. In a package deal proposed by Byrnes, the Soviets agreed to accept Italy in the UN after a peace treaty could be arranged; the United States and Great Britain agreed to set the temporary western border of Poland at the Oder-Neisse line; and the Soviets settled for less than the \$10 billion in German reparations that Roosevelt had loosely promised at Yalta. The final agreement on reparations was so loose and so dependent upon undefined matters (the economic level necessary for the German peacetime economy) that it provoked bitter discord in the next year.

The American-Soviet discussions of Soviet entry into the Japanese war avoided sharp disagreements. The Soviet leaders emphasized that intervention awaited a settlement of Sino-Soviet negotiations, but entry seemed near. According to Truman, Stalin forecast entry by August 15, but a top Soviet general later told Marshall the "last half of August."

#### Truman's Diary

In 1978, after thirty-three years, Truman's handwritten secret diary for seven of his days at Potsdam—July 16, 17, 18, 20, 25, 26, and 30—became available at the Truman library. It had been tucked away among the segment of his papers opened well after his death. That diary, unpublished until now, allows us to examine those critical days through a new lens.

There is an obvious but difficult set of questions: Why did he keep this brief diary? Was it for his own record, possibly to show to friends and relatives, or maybe for later publication? There is no clear answer for his Potsdam diary, nor for the few daily accounts he had made in the preceding weeks or for the more frequent but still scattered entries of later years. And there is the curious matter that the Potsdam diary contains entries for only seven days. Were there diary accounts for other days at Potsdam that got lost over the years? It is possible since Truman seems to have been relatively careless with his papers. His view of some of the

other days can be pieced together from occasional letters to his mother and to associates in the United States.

#### The Edited Diary

Here is the entire transcribed diary, with occasional additions and corrections by the editor in brackets.

#### Berlin, July 16 [19]45

Today has been an historical one. Arrived last night from Antwerp via the President's C-54 and was driven to the movie colony district in Potsdam. The German Will Hays [America's movie czar] apparently had what is considered the best house. It was fixed up for me as President and called the Berlin White House. It is a dirty yellow and red. A ruined French chateau—architectural style ruined by German endeavor to cover up the French. They erected a couple of tombstone chimneys on each side of the porch facing the lake so they would cover up the beautiful chateau roof and tower. Make the place look like hell but purely German—just like the Kansas City Union Station.

We did not see but two German civilians on the several mile drive from the airport to the yellow "White House."

The house[,] as were all others[,] was stripped of everything by the Russians—not even a tin spoon left. The American commander[,] however being a man of ener[gy][,] caught the Russian loot train and recovered enough furniture to make the place livable. Nothing matches. We have a two-ton German sideboard in the dining room and a French or Chippendale table and chair—maybe a mixture of both. There is a birdseye maple wardrobe and an oak chest matching the two-ton sideboard in my bedroom. It is comfortable enough all round but what a nightmare! it would give an interior decorator.

To get down to today, Mr. Churchill called by phone last night and said he'd like to call—for me to set the hour. I did—for 11 A.M. this morning. He was on time to the dot. His daughter told Gen. [Harry] Vaughan [Truman's military aide] he hadn't been up so early in ten years! I'd been up for four and one half hours.

We had a most pleasant conversation. He is a most charming and a very clever person—meaning clever in the English not the Kentucky sense. He gave me a lot of

hooy about how great my country is and how he loved Roosevelt and how he intended to love me etc. etc. Well I gave him as cordial a reception as I could—being naturally (I hope) a polite and agreeable person.

I am sure we can get along if he doesn't try to give me too much soft soap. You know soft soap is made of ash hopper lie [lye] and it burns to beat hell when it gets into the eyes. It's fine for chigger bites but not so good for rose complexions. But I haven't a rose complexion.

We struck a "blow for liberty" when he left in Scotch—not the right brand for the purpose as the old V.P. Jack Garner can testify.

The photo men had a field day when he left. At 3:30 P.M. Mr. Sec [of State James F.] Byrnes, Adm. (five star) [William D.] Leahy and I left in an open car for Berlin, followed by my two aides and various and sundry secret service and military guards and preceded by a two star general in a closed car with a couple of plain-clothes men to fool em if they wanted to do any target practice of consequence on the Pres. They didn't.

We reviewed the Second Armoured Division and tied a citation on the guidon of Co. E 17th Armoured Engr. B[rigade]. Gen Collier[,] who seemed to know his stuff[,] put us in a reconnaissance car built with side seats and no top just like a hoodlum wagon minus the top or a fire truck with seats and no hose and we drove slowly down a mile and a half of good soldiers and some millions of dollars of equipment which had amply paid its way to Berlin.

Then we went to Berlin and saw absolute ruin. Hitler's folly. He overreached himself by trying to take in too much territory. He had no morals and his people backed him up. Never did I see a more sorrowful sight, nor witness retribution to the nth degree.

The most sorrowful part of the situation is the deluded Hitlerian populace. Of course the Russians have kidnapped the able bodied and I suppose have made involuntary workmen of them. They have also looted every house left standing and have sent the loot to Russia. But Hitler did the same thing to them.

It is the Golden Rule in reverse—and it is not an uplifting sight. What a pity that the human animal is not able to put his moral thinking into practice!

We saw old men, old women, young women, children from tots to teens carrying packs [,] pushing carts, pulling carts, evidently ejected by the conquerors and carrying what they could of their belongings to nowhere in particular.

I thought of Carthage, Baalbek [Baalbek], Jerusalem, Rome, At-

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lanta, Peking, Babylon, Nineveh;—Scipio, Rameses II, Titus, Hermann, Sherman, Genghis Khan, Alexander, Darius the Great—but Hitler only destroyed Stalingrad—and Berlin. I hope for some sort of peace—but I fear that machines are ahead of morals by some centuries and when morals catch up perhaps there'll [be] no reason for any of it.

I hope not, but we are only termites on a planet and maybe when we bore too deeply into the planet there'll [be] a reckoning—who knows?

**July 17 '45**

Just spent a couple of hours with Stalin. Joe Davies [former American ambassador to Russia] called on [Ivan] Maisky [Assistant Foreign Minister] and made the date last night for noon today. Promptly a few minutes before twelve I looked up from the desk and there stood Stalin in the doorway. I got to my feet and advanced to meet him. He put out his hand and smiled. I did the same [and] we shook. I greeted Molotov and the interpreter and we sat down. After the usual polite remarks we got down to business. I told Stalin that I am no diplomat but usually said yes or no to questions after hearing all the argument. It pleased him. I asked him if he had the agenda for the meeting. He said he had and

that he had some more questions to present. I told him to fire away. He did and it is dynamite—but I have some dynamite too which I am not exploding now. He wants to fire Franco [Spain's dictator], to which I wouldn't object and divide up the Italian colonies and other mandates, some no doubt that the British have. Then he got on the Chinese situation [and] told us what agreements had been reached and what was in abeyance. Most of the big points are settled. He'll be in the Jap War on August 15th. Fini Japs when that comes about. We had lunch[,] talked socially[,] put on a real show drinking toasts to everyone[,] then had pictures made in the backyard. I can deal with Stalin. He is honest—but smart as hell.

**July 18 [19]45**

Ate breakfast with nephew Harry, a sergeant in the Field Artillery. He is a good soldier and a nice boy. They took him off *Queen Elizabeth* at Glasco [Glasgow Harbor] and flew him here. Sending him home Friday. Went to lunch with P.M. [Prime Minister Churchill] at 1:30 [and] walked around to British Hqrs. Met at the gate by Mr. Churchill. Guard of honor drawn up. Fine body of men Scottish guards. Band played Star Spangled Banner. Inspected Guard and went in for lunch. P.M. & I ate alone. Discussed Manhattan [A-bomb] (it is a success). Decided to tell Stalin about it. Stalin had told P.M. of telegram from Jap Emperor [actually from the Foreign Secretary] asking for peace. Stalin also read his answer to me. It was satisfactory. Believe Japs will fold before Russia comes in.

I am sure they will when Manhattan [A-bomb] appears over their homeland. I shall inform Stalin about it at opportune time. Stalin's luncheon was a most satisfactory meeting. I invited him to come to the U.S. Told him I'd send the Battleship *Missouri* for him if he'd come. He said he wanted to cooperate with the U.S. in peace as we had cooperated in war but it would be harder. Said he was grossly misunderstood in U.S. and I was misunderstood in Russia. I told him that we each could help to remedy that situation in our home countries and that I intended to try with all I

had to do my part at home. He gave me a most cordial smile and said he would do as much in Russia.

We then went to the conference and it was my job to present the Ministers proposed agenda. There were three proposals [on peace machinery, a Control Commission for Germany, and the Polish question] and I banged them through in short order, much to the surprise of Mr. Churchill. Stalin was very much pleased. Churchill was too after he had recovered. I'm not going to stay around this terrible place all summer just to listen to speeches. I'll go home to the Senate for that.

### July 20 [19]45

Jim Blair now Lt. Col. came in for breakfast. Harry [Truman's nephew] left for Paris and N.Y. Sure hated to see him go. Discussed German situation with Jim. He had been in command of clean up detail which prepared for the American occupation, especially for our conference delegation. Said it was the filthiest place imaginable. No sanitary arrangements whatever. Toilets all full and all stopped up. Basements used as outdoor toilets. Said the sewer system evidently hadn't worked for months. Same all over town. Said Germans are sore and sullen. That we would not treat them rough enough. Russians treated 'em too rough and too kindly. Anyway it's a hell of a mess any way it's taken.

Saw Gen Omar Bradley about taking over the Vets. bureau [Veterans Administration]. Will take over Aug. 15th. Talked to Gen. [Dwight D.] Eisenhower about government of Germany along same lines as I'd talked to Gen. [Lucius D.] Clay [America's deputy military governor in Germany]. Got a concrete program to present.

Raised a flag over our area in Berlin. It is the flag raised in Rome, North Africa and Paris. Flag was on the White House when Pearl Harbor happened. Will be raised over Tokyo.

Uncle Joe [Stalin] looked drawn and tired today and the P.M. seemed lost. I told 'em U.S. had ceased to give away its assets without returns.

### July 25 1945

We met at 11 A.M. today. That is

Stalin, Churchill and the U.S. president. But I had a most important session with Lord [Louis M.] Mountbatten and General [George C.] Marshall [army chief of staff] before that. We have discovered the most terrible bomb [the A-bomb] in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark.

Anyway we think we have found the way to cause a disintegration of the atom. An experiment in the New Mexican desert [at Alamo-gordo on July 16th] was startling—to put it mildly. Thirteen pounds of the explosive caused the complete disintegration of a steel tower 60 feet high, created a crater 6 feet deep and 1200 feet in diameter, knocked over a steel tower ½ mile away and knocked down men 10,000 yards away. The explosion was visible for more than 200 miles and audible for 40 miles and more.

The weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10th. I have told the Sec. of War Mr [Henry L.] Stimson to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop this terrible bomb on the old Capital [Kyoto] or the new [Tokyo].

He & I are in accord. The target will be a purely military one and we will issue a warning statement [the Potsdam Declaration on the 26th] asking the Japs to surrender and save lives. I'm sure they will not do that, but we will have given them the chance. It is certainly a good thing for the world that Hitler's crowd or Stalin's did not discover this atomic bomb. It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful.

At 10:15 I had Gen. Marshall come in and discuss with me the tactical and political situation. He is a level-headed man—so is Mountbatten.

At the Conference Poland and the Bolsheviki land grab came up. Russia helped herself to a slice of Poland and gave Poland a nice slice of Germany taking also a good slice of East Prussia for herself. Poland has moved in up to the Oder and

the west Neisse, taking Stettin and Silesia as a fact accomplished. My position is that according to commitments made at Yalta by my predecessor Germany was to be divided into four occupation zones, one each for Britain, Russia and France and the U.S. If Russia chooses to allow Poland to occupy a part of her zone I am agreeable but title to territory cannot and will not be settled here. For the fourth time I restated my position and explained that territorial cessions had to be made by treaty and ratified by the Senate.

We discussed preparations and movement of populations from East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria[,] Italy and elsewhere. Churchill said Maisky had so defined war booty as to includ[e] the German fleet and Merchant Marine. It was a bombshell and sort of paralyzed the Russkies, but it has a lot of merit.

### July 26, 1945

Last night talked to Gen [Brehon B.] Somerville [Somervell, commanding general of the army service forces] on time for universal military training. Regular Army wants a straight year. I am very sure it cannot be put into effect. Talked to [Jefferson] McCaffery [American ambassador to France] about France. He is scared stiff of Communism, the Russian variety which isn't communism at all but just police, government pure and simple. A few top hands just take clubs, pistols and concentration camps and rule the people on the lower levels.

The Communist Party in Moscow is no different in its methods and actions toward the common man than were the Czar and the Russian Noblemen (so called: they were anything but noble.) Nazis and Fascists were worse. It seems that Sweden, Norway, Denmark and perhaps Switzerland have the only real peoples government on the Continent of Europe. But the rest are a bad lot from the standpoint of the people who do not believe in tyrann[ny].

### July 30, 1945

Sent Capt. [James] Vardaman [naval aide] to ship at Portsmouth, Eng. to get ready for departure to US some day soon. Secretary of  
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**TRUMAN AT POSTDAM:  
HIS SECRET DIARY**

*from page 34*

Navy Jas [James] For[r]estal came to breakfast with me and we discussed universal military service after the war and navy policy on officer training etc. Gen Eisenhower and son were also at breakfast with us. His boy is a nice fellow. Adm [Edward L.] Cochran[e] and several other naval officers were present.

Conference is delayed. Stalin and Molotov were to call on me yesterday to discuss Polish question and Reparations. Molotov came but no Stalin. Said he was sick. No big three meeting yesterday and none today as a result of Stalin's indisposition. Sent him a note expressing regret at his illness. Sent Churchill a note of consolation, telling him we regretted his failure to return [after the Labor Party victory] and wishing him a long and happy life.

If Stalin should suddenly cash in it would be the end of the original Big Three. First Roosevelt by

death, then Churchill by political failure and then Stalin. I am wondering what would happen to Russia and central Europe if Joe suddenly passed out. If some demagogue on horseback gained control of the efficient Russian military machine, he could play havoc with European peace for a while. I also wonder if there is a man with the necessary strength and following to step into Stalin's place and maintain peace and solidarity at home. It isn't customary for dictators to train leaders to follow them in power. I've seen no one at this Conference in the Russian line up who can do the job. Molotov is not able to do it. He lacks sincerity. Vishinsky same thing and Maisky is short on honesty. Well we shall see what we shall see. Uncle Joe's pretty tough mentally and physically but there is an end to every man and we can't help but speculate.

We are at an impasse on Poland and its West Neisse to the Czechoslovakian border. Just a unilateral arrangement without so much as a by your leave. I don't like it.

Roosevelt let Maisky mention twenty billions as reparations [from Germany]—half for Russia and half for everybody else. Experts say no such figure is available.

I've made it plain that the United States of America does not intend to pay reparations this time [as after World War I]. I want the German war industry machine completely dismantled and [as] far as U.S. is concerned the other allies can divide it up on any basis they choose. Food and other necessities we send into the restored countries and Germany must be first lein [lien] on export[s] before reparation[s]. If Russian[s] strip country and carry off population of course there'll be no reparations.

I have offered a waterway program [for Europe] and a suggestion for free intercourse between Central European nations [on the Danube] which will help keep future peace. Our only hope for good from the European War is restored prosperity to Europe and future trade with them. It is a sick situation at best.

