

THE STORY OF A PETITION

L. Szilard - July 28, 1946.

Throughout most of the war many of us who worked on the atomic bomb, believed, as we now know mistakenly, that we are in a neck-to-neck race with the Germans and at times we even believed that the Germans were ahead of us. Had the Germans obtained substantial quantities of atomic bombs before we had completed our own work and before we had been in the position to retaliate, we would have been in danger of losing the war. With this possibility constantly before our eyes we were impatient with the many delays and setbacks which we found hindering the progress of our work. By the Spring of 1945 our outlook began to change. At that time it became obvious that Germany would lose the war within a short time. Some branches of the project, for instance the branch located at the University of Chicago, had essentially completed their task and could begin thinking beyond their daily problems. Between March 1945 and the end of May, I drafted a number of memoranda dealing with the question of whether or not atomic bombs, if perfected, should be used in this war, ~~and dealing with this problem~~ from the point of view of the long range problem that will face us *after the war.* ~~rather than the point of view of the immediate effect of the use of the bomb.~~ In June of 1945, after President Truman appointed <sup>the</sup> ~~a~~ so-called Interim Committee, under the chairmanship of Stimson, the Metallurgical Laboratory was officially asked to take a stand on

this question and the Director of the Laboratory, A. H. Compton, appointed a committee composed of Franck, Seaborg, Stearns, Hughes and Szilard. The report of this committee was rushed to Stimson and advised against the outright military use of ~~the~~ atomic bombs in the war against Japan. It took a stand in favor of demonstrating the power of the atomic bomb in a manner which will avoid mass slaughter but yet convince the Japanese of the destructive power of the bomb. By the beginning of July it became evident, at least to me, personally, that the use of the bomb will be examined by the Interim Committee purely on the basis of expediency, and that great weight will be given by them to the immediate effect, rather than to the long range effects. It appeared in the circumstances that those of us who were opposed to the use of the bomb on moral grounds ought to go on record and that we should address ourselves to the President directly, rather than to the Secretary of War. A petition to the President was thus drafted in the first days of July and sent to every group leader in the Metallurgical Laboratory, with the request to circulate it within his group. This petition was based purely on moral considerations. "Many of us are inclined to say", so the covering letter stated, "that individual Germans share the guilt for the acts which Germany committed during this war because they did not raise their voices in protest against those acts. Their defense that their protest would have been of no avail hardly seems acceptable even though these Germans could not have protested without running risks to life and liberty. We are in a position to raise our voices without incurring any such risks even though we might incur the dis-

pleasure of some of those who are at present in charge of controlling the work on 'atomic power'."

We did not have to wait for ~~long~~<sup>very</sup> long for signs of this displeasure. Naturally, the Army did not like the idea of a petition to the President on such a subject. However the Constitution states clearly 'the right to petition shall not be abridged' and the Constitution won out.

"Atomic bombs are primarily a means", so the petition stated, "for the ruthless annihilation of cities. Once they were introduced as an instrument of war it would be difficult to resist for long the temptation of putting them to such use".

"The last few years show a marked tendency toward increasing ruthlessness. At present our Air Forces, striking at the Japanese cities, are using the same methods of warfare which were condemned by American public opinion only a few years ago when applied by the Germans to the cities of England. Our use of atomic bombs in this war would carry the world a long way further on this path of ruthlessness."

And finally, the last paragraph read, "In view of the foregoing, we, the undersigned, respectfully petition that you exercise your power as Commander-in-Chief to rule that the United States shall not, in the present phase of the war, resort to the use of atomic bombs".

Fifty-nine members of the Staff of the Metallurgical Laboratory at the University of Chicago, signed this petition, a substantial minority of the Staff.

Since a number of the staff members who did not sign the petition indicated that they would be willing to sign it if some of the paragraphs of the petition were re-phrased, a new petition was drafted and began to circulate in the Laboratory on the 17th of July, one day after the test at Alamogordo, New Mexico. This petition was sent to the President of the United States through the official channels and was signed by sixty-seven members of the Staff. Its text is given in the following:

July 17, 1945

A PETITION TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Discoveries of which the people of the United States are not aware may affect the welfare of this nation in the near future. The liberation of atomic power which has been achieved places atomic bombs in the hands of the Army. It places in your hands, as Commander-in-Chief, the fateful decision whether or not to sanction the use of such bombs in the present phase of the war against Japan.

We, the undersigned scientists, have been working in the field of atomic power. Until recently we have had to fear that the United States might be attacked by atomic bombs during this war and that her only defense might lie in a counterattack by the same means. Today, with the defeat of Germany, this danger is averted and we feel impelled to say what follows:

The war has to be brought speedily to a successful conclusion and attacks by atomic bombs may very well be an effective method of warfare. We feel, however, that such attacks on Japan could not be justified, at least not unless the terms which will be imposed after the war on Japan were made public in detail and Japan were given an opportunity to surrender.

If such public announcement gave assurance to the Japanese that they could look forward to a life devoted to peaceful pursuits in their homeland and if Japan still refused to surrender our nation might then, in certain circumstances, find itself forced to resort to the use of atomic bombs. Such a step, however, ought not to be made at any time without seriously considering the moral responsibilities which are involved.

The development of atomic power will provide the nations with new means of destruction. The atomic bombs at our disposal represent only the first step in this direction and there is almost no limit to the destructive power which will become available in the course of their future development. Thus a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.

If after this war a situation is allowed to develop in the world which permits rival powers to be in uncontrolled possession of these new means of destruction, the cities of the United States as well as the cities of other nations will be in continuous danger of sudden annihilation. All the resources of the United States, moral and material, may have to be mobilized to prevent the advent of such a world situation. Its prevention is at present the solemn responsibility of the United States--singled out by virtue of her lead in the field of atomic power.

The added material strength which this lead gives to the United States brings with it the obligation of restraint and if we were to violate this obligation our moral position would be weakened in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes. It would then be more difficult for us to live up to our responsibility of bringing the unloosed forces of destruction under control.

In view of the foregoing, we, the undersigned, respectfully petition: first, that you exercise your power as Commander-in-Chief, to rule that the United States shall not resort to the use of atomic bombs in this war unless the terms which will be imposed upon Japan have been made public in detail and Japan knowing these terms has refused to surrender; second, that in such an event the question whether or not to use atomic bombs be decided by you in the light of the considerations presented in this petition as well as all the other moral responsibilities which are involved.