

Moving closer to the Atomic Energy Commission

Last week we examined some events in Oak Ridge resulting from the struggle for control of atomic weapons. There was also a transition period and struggle within President Truman's cabinet regarding the same issue of control over this genie that was now out of the bottle.

Meanwhile, on an international level there was a huge debate raging regarding international control of the atomic bomb. Primary nations included in the debate were the United States, Canada, Great Britain and the Soviet Union.

Although allies during World War II, many of the leaders in the United States government already considered the Soviet Union a threat, even while working with them to defeat Germany. Remember that the British and the United States shared efforts, at least at first, on atomic bomb research. However, that was NOT the case with the Soviet Union.

When President Truman informed Stalin of the "powerful new weapon" at the Potsdam Conference, Stalin already knew of the Manhattan Project effort. Thus distrust was already much in place between the two coming super powers.

Here in the United States, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, as he was leaving office on his 78th birthday, September 21, 1945, presented a plan to President Truman and his cabinet that promoted cooperation directly with the Soviet Union on nuclear weapons. Others did not necessarily agree with Stimson on this matter.

Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, for one, did not share Stimson's enthusiasm that the Soviet Union could be trusted to stop nuclear weapons work, if the United States agreed to do so. Because of these two opposing positions in President Truman's cabinet, other input was sought.

There was a strong position taken by Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal who saw the atomic bomb as the "property of the American people" that should not be given away. This position was a popular one.

During September 1945, public opinion polls showed that 70 percent of the people polled and 90 percent of the congress who were asked did not want to share the United States' atomic secrets. President Truman tried to gain international arrangements to control the use and development of atomic bombs, but did not succeed. Soon after he announced that the US would not share the engineering and technical details of the atomic bomb.

President Truman never fully committed to Stimson's proposal, but he did agree that the Soviet Union must be included in some way. On October 3, 1945 the president addressed Congress on the subject of atomic energy. Here he first mentioned the need for international agreements.

Attempts were made to engage in discussions with Canada, Great Britain and the Soviet Union through Secretary of State Byrnes. His most significant failure was with the Soviets when their Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov refused to be at all impressed with the United States and our atomic bombs.

Next President Truman brought Vannevar Bush into the discussion and Bush proposed a plan whereby the United Nations would create a scientific agency to implement international controls. Remember, Bush had been a key player all along as the Manhattan Project was being formed.

As he had managed when proposing the Manhattan Project effort with President Roosevelt, Bush was now able to create a plan that was acceptable to President Truman and his cabinet. He managed to define a strategy whereby the Soviets could be included without giving them any real control through his use of the United Nations.

General Groves was also called in to consult on this decision as well. His contribution to the situation was a more tactical and immediate one - what to do with the present stockpile of materials and ongoing effort.

Groves was asked what to do about the present effort to produce more atomic bombs as the stock of available nuclear weapons had essentially been depleted by the test at Trinity and the two bombs used to end the war. His response, agreed to by Bush, was to recommend the manufacture of uranium 235 and plutonium to continue for the present time.

The thought was that if something happened on the international front to control the production of nuclear weapons, then stopping production of the atomic materials would be included in the negotiations. Their recommendation was that the President would then announce that no more bombs would be produced.

At a meeting in Washington, DC the British and Canadians agreed with this approach and issued a joint declaration, drafted primarily by Vannevar Bush, proposing a United Nation's atomic energy commission be established.

The United Nations would be the governing body for this approach. The commission would prepare recommendations on international control of atomic weapons. The next step was to bring the Soviet Union into the discussion.

Next week we will see how this failed and led to the formation of the United States Atomic Energy Commission.