

MANHATTAN PROJECT — ASSIGNMENT 1 — ESSAY DRAFT

BACKGROUND

On Dec. 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor, a naval base in Hawaii, was bombed by Japan, and the United States declared war on Japan the next day. Meanwhile WWII had already been raging in Europe for two years (since Hitler invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939).

In 1942, the Manhattan Project became a large and secret U.S. military project. Over the next few years 500,000 people contributed to the project. Very few knew what they were contributing to.

On August 6, 1945, the U.S. destroyed Hiroshima with the Little Boy atomic bomb. Little Boy exploded with the power of 15,000 tons of conventional explosives. (A ton is 2,000 pounds.) On August 9, 1945, the U.S. destroyed Nagasaki with the Fat Man atomic bomb. Fat Man exploded with the power of 20,000 tons of conventional explosives.

For comparison, a Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress could carry 4 tons or 8,000 pounds of explosives, and a Boeing B-29 Superfortress could carry 10 tons or 20,000 pounds of explosives. In other words, a single bomber, carrying a single atomic bomb, could do as much damage as about 1,000 bombers could do if they dropped their bombs all at once on a single target.

PROMPT

If you were recruited by the U.S. military in 1942 to work on a secret project that you were told could change the outcome of WWII, what would you have done, assuming you had the freedom to accept or refuse the recruitment? How would you have felt about this decision?

Consider both possibilities: (1) That due to secrecy, you do not know the ultimate goal of the secret project, only that it is a very large and important weapons project, or (2) that you are an insider and you know that the project goal is to produce atomic bombs.

OTHER DIRECTIONS

This can and should be draft-quality rather than finished quality. It is meant to be from the heart, like a journal entry of someone actually making the decision to be part of the Manhattan Project, rather than an argumentative and analytical essay. Unlike a private journal entry, it will be shared with your classmates for discussion. You do not need to research the paper.

LENGTH

500 words, double-spaced, occupying two pages (adjust spacing and font to keep it so if you are a little off).

DUE

By email, before class on Tuesday, Jan. 17 (9:30am). Simply turning it in counts as a regular assignment. (Most assignments will be problem sets, not essays.)

AGAIN

This can be draft quality. It will be read by others. It will otherwise not be graded. You will be revisiting this draft later.

Norah Geiger

1/16/42

Brian Hill's "*The Manhattan Project*"

Journal Entry:

The telegrams now make sense. I received a full length letter today from the army explaining everything in greater detail. It came in an envelope so thick that I cut four fingers just trying to pry it open. This may have been from the sheer force of speed which the whole ordeal involved, I was sure everything which has preceded this— so much uncertainty, paranoia, and sleeplessness— would be clarified. For this realization of peace I was frantically desperate.

I don't know how to write this yet, everything is too new and newly convoluted. I haven't eaten nor spoken to anyone yet, for hours I've been sitting in front of this envelope, and you, dear journal unsure of what to do. It's been a year since I've been in Austria-Hungary, and my position here is still unstable. Still, when I think of my small cousins so close to turmoil and their mothers and fathers already so firmly imprisoned within it, I cannot stay still. I know that if I were to confirm my place within this mission, it could change everything, but I cannot shake certain suspicions. To fight evil men with evil weapons, I do not know what that does, and I doubt I'll be aiding in the manufacturing of rifles or shotguns. Not after everything I've been working on. I know what they want me for, and it seems inhumanly risky. I know that I feel now that I would do anything to end it all, but there must be limits to ones' desires and convictions. These experiments belong to God, not man, I think- they are as miraculous as our own creation story. I worry they will be our destruction.

1/17/42

I know in my heart, I will have to say yes, even if it cements my place in history as a monster of the highest degree. I've begun to fantasize now of melting off Hitler's mustache with acid, every wall of Auchwitz, every Nazi uniform, every Nazi body, dripping in shades of grey, crimson, and white from the gamey bones of Germany. I will do it for you, mother. Whatever they ask, I will do it.

Signing off,

Norah Geiger

Mac

1/16/42

I was contacted today with regards to a secret Allied weapons project of which I know little. I am unsure of how to go about responding to this request. Is it wrong to participate in the creation of a weapon that will surely take many lives? What if they are German lives? What if taking them spares conflict and lives across the continent by ending the war? There is much to consider.

My initial reaction, as a peace-loving man, is disgust. I have no wish to partake in mass slaughter abroad. If I participate in this project the blood of many naive young men, whether enemy or civilian, will doubtless be on my hands. What wish do I have to use my knowledge and expertise to kill?

And yet, I am not so sure of this initial reaction. I know for a fact that my people are being slaughtered by the Nazis across Europe. The little news that I have heard smuggled out from areas under Nazi control tell of mass murder, of brutal pogroms, and of death camps where Jewish civilians are systematically exterminated. These are my people, brothers and sisters in my faith, and it is true that I have a duty to them that would best be realized through the defeat of the Nazi war machine. It is not just the Jews to whom I have a duty, however, but to all of the innocents being killed, and even to the soldiers who go daily to their deaths in the islands of the Pacific and the fields of Europe.

If this weapon killed one hundred thousand men, but ended the war today, I would be doing the world good. Hypothetically I could save lives through participating in the creation of a weapon of mass murder. But, that is only if this weapon is good enough, strong enough, dramatic enough, to end the war in one fell swoop. If it is not it will be just one more in a line of developments such as the machine gun, or the bomber, which do nothing for the overall state of the war except for increasing its horrific toll. For this weapon to do good in the world it must not simply be a new and more efficient way of killing men, but something that so dramatically alters the power balance as to render the killing already being done irrelevant.

So it seems that I must join this project. I must make this weapon as powerful as possible, so as to enable it to end the war. There must be no half measures. I must create something so terrible as to shock an already numb world to a halt. I must create a weapon which will paralyze battlefields with awe, something that will force the Axis nations to admit immediate defeat and forego continued and grinding violence. So I will join this project. I will do what they want, and I will do it well. This is our only hope of ending the war and saving the lives of so many across the world.

Trey Longnecker

Manhattan Project

1/12/2023

Scientist Journal Assignment

Feb 23, 1943

Berkeley, CA

It seems that the “project” that devoured Reese (a hundred days ago now, and nearing a date sort of like our anniversary, although I know he’d hate me calling it that) is set to devour me too.

On my way back from the lab, alone straight stooped mile walk, I noticed a man following me. I thought of walking past the house but I was tired. I hadn’t taken my shoes off when I heard a knock at the door. I couldn’t avoid it. Three of them came in cordial like.

They asked me what I knew about a laboratory in New Mexico. I said I didn’t know and I didn’t lie. They asked me what I knew about “a national research project” and I said is that what has taken everyone smart away from here? Then they said that they can say nothing more until I agreed to go and signed a contract. They said they needed people like me and that this project is of great importance to the war effort. I said why do you need me? They said they couldn’t say anything more. They put the pen in my hand and I signed. It felt automatic. I asked for more and they said that I leave tomorrow. I will be driven. All will be explained in New Mexico. Wait, I said, tell me is it dangerous? He was out the door. Wait, I said, how many will die? He slowed. He said sir, that is none of your concern.

So I am packed for the desert. I remember the night Reese showed up at my house at three AM all frantic and out of breath. He said he was leaving and couldn't say where he was leaving to. He said is it wrong if I don't mean to do anything wrong? I couldn't answer. He was crying. He said to come in the bathroom and turned on the faucet and the shower and hunched over beneath the counter. They're close, he said, no one knows how close they are. As soon as they get the materials, he said? I didn't know what he was talking about. Every atom split, he said, no just a tenth or a percent of fifty or a hundred or just a pound. Cities just gone.

I didn't think of this with the pen in my hand, but it wouldn't have changed my choice. I am a scientist, not a killer. This bomb is inevitable. I would rather we drop it on some Nazi military camp than they drop it on London or sneak it into Washington. I'd rather feel like I'm changing history than sit here subject to it. Imagine if they won and I was sitting here lecturing to quarter-full auditoriums if I'm lucky. Whatever happens, this was no choice. I had to go. If something goes wrong I was just solving a problem that I was especially suited to solve. If anything happens that kills anybody I'm sorry. We were just faster.

And maybe Reese will be there.