

The History Club meeting was held at the VFW Post in Midland Park on Tuesday, November 2. The topic of my presentation was the "The Manhattan Project also known as Manhattan Engineer District, codename- Development of Substitute Materials. This is the story of how the United States along with the United Kingdom and Canada brought forth the best of the Scientific World, the Military and the Industrial complex, and collaboration of the Civilian and Military Engineers to create a weapon the (atomic bomb), more powerful than any the world had known. The mission was to beat Nazi Germany in the development of the atomic bomb and, to end the war early in a successful conclusion.

The story started in 1938 when German chemists Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann accidentally discovered nuclear fission while bombarding Uranium 235 with Neutrons. They did not understand and cannot explain what happened. So they sent their findings to physicist, Lise Meitner who explained it was theoretically possible to develop atomic bomb based on nuclear fission. This was confirmed by another physicist, Niels Bohr and further stated that it was the isotope of Uranium 235 that was involved in the nuclear fission. In 1939, Albert Einstein signed the letter authored by Leo Szilard and addressed to President Roosevelt advising him to fund research into the possibility of using nuclear fission as a weapon as Nazi Germany may also be conducting such a research. In 1940, the United Kingdom established the MAUD committee to investigate the feasibility of an atomic bomb. In January 1942 President Roosevelt formally authorized the atomic bomb project. General Leslie Groves was appointed the director of the Manhattan Project and as director, he possessed unprecedented and remarkable power, while physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer was appointed the director of the Los Alamos laboratory in New Mexico responsible for research, development and testing of nuclear weapons.

The Manhattan Project employed more than 130,000 workers with sites located from coast to coast including Canada. It operated under the shroud of extreme secrecy and despite tight security Soviet atomic spies successfully penetrated the program. In three short years, the Manhattan Project was able to develop this most powerful and fearsome weapon (atomic bomb) that was dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Many questions remained in the minds of historians and political commentators. Did the atomic cause Japan to surrender? Was the bomb necessary to end the war? How about political, moral and racial prejudice issues? Many thoughts, reflections and opinions have evolved for the past 76 years. I guess the big question is, what would you do if you were President Truman in 1945?