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(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Clarke: Welcome to Pritzker Military Presents with author AJ Baime discussing his book *The Accidental President: Harry S. Truman and the Four Months that Changed the World*. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program's coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago, and it's sponsored by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and members of the Museum and Library. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. On April 12, 1945, Harry S. Truman had the weight of the world placed directly on his shoulders. He had been vice president for just eighty-two days when President Franklin D. Roosevelt unexpectedly passed away at the crucial and amplifying moments leading up to the end of WWII. Just eleven days prior, US forces had landed on Okinawa and were a month shy of liberating the Mauthausen death camp. After Truman was sworn in, he was informed of the atomic bomb being developed in New Mexico. During the climatic months leading up to the end of the war, Truman had to play judge and jury, pulling America to the forefront of the global stage. No other president had ever faced so much in such a short period of time. The first four months of Truman's administration saw the founding of the United Nations, the fall of Berlin, victory at Okinawa, fire bombings of Tokyo, the first atomic explosion, the Nazi's surrender and the liberation of concentration camps, the mass starvation of Europe, the Potsdam Conference, the controversial decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the surrender of imperial Japan, and finally the end of WWII and the rise of the Cold War. In his war, AJ Baime details the incredible pressure under which Truman's work ethic and good judgment helped solidify this unlikely president's legacy during a tumultuous time in American history and the impact his administration had on America's leadership post-WWII. AJ Baime is a New York Times best-selling author of *The Arsenal of Democracy* and *Go Like Hell*. Both books are in development for major motion pictures. Baime is a longtime regular contributor to the Wall Street Journal, and his articles have also appeared in the New York Times, Popular Science, and Men's Journal. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library AJ Baime.

(Applause)

Baime: Hi everybody. Thank you. Thank you very much. I want to start by saying just a personal message. This is--I've given a lot of talks like this around the country talking about books and ideas, and this is a very special night for my wife and I. You're here somewhere Michelle. Hey, front row. How'd you get a front row seat? This is a very special night for us. We moved to Chicago during the downturn of the economy. When you're a journalist you get shifted around the country, and we had lived in Boston and New York for many years. And Chicago is a uniquely wonderful place. And we met lifelong friends, and many of them are here tonight. And we no longer live in Chicago, sadly. Being a journalist, you get shipped around the country, but so many friends are here tonight, and so it's a very special night for our family. So what am I talking about tonight? I'm gonna call this talk tonight, this is how you earn respect in Washington. Remember that: this is how you earn respect in Washington. And I'm gonna be talking about Harry Truman. I think you know that already. I'm gonna start with a parable. Maybe some people have heard this before, maybe not. But it sounds like a joke as I

start, but it's not. So two drunk people are in a bar, and they're arguing about the existence of God. And one is a religious man, and he's a believer. And the other is an atheist. And the atheist is telling a story, and he says, "Last night this amazing thing happened to me. I was in the woods, and it was pitch black, and I was hungry and cold, and I was lost, and there was a blizzard, and I was sure that I was going to die. And so I thought, what the heck, I'll give this God thing a shot," and he gets down on his knees and prays. And they're at the bar, and the religious man, the believer, he says, "This is great. Don't you understand that this is proof? Look, you're here; you survived. This is proof of God." And the atheist says, "No, a man came by through the woods in the middle of the night and showed me the way home. It had nothing to do with God." And so the point of the parable is, isn't it amazing that two people can look at the exact same scenario and come to such opposing conclusions with such immaculate belief? Now, here's a picture of something that you—you've probably seen this picture before. We've had seventy-two years to talk about this. This is the Trinity shot, the first blast of an atomic bomb. Now we've had seventy-two years to talk about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We've had seventy-two year to read the books, look at the documentation, read the diaries of all the people that were involved and the memoirs--the people involved in making this decision. And it's extraordinary that after seventy-two years we can't agree. I'm sure a lot of people here-- you have strong convictions. All of us. We've all read the books, and we all have our beliefs. The Truman Library, it's remarkable. There's a whole section of the library about the decision to drop the atomic bomb. And there's a book there, and visitors --there are tens of thousands of them there every year—they're encouraged to write their opinions in this book and say, "Well I thought this was a good idea," or "I thought it was a bad idea, and this is why." And when you flip through the book, it's extraordinary. You see--it's funny because you see--you can tell by the handwriting, sometimes you see kids who are on school trips, and they'll say, "This was a terrible idea. So many people died." Other people will say, "Well, this was an amazing thing we did because it saved lives." And even after seventy-two years, we'll never know. And we'll never--many of us will never agree. And that's why we write books; that's why history is a living, breathing thing. That's why we have politics and political parties and political debate. Because we're never going to agree about everything. Even rational people, we're always gonna have disagreements. And amazingly never has that been more true than today. So what is this book about, and what am I going to be talking about Harry Truman? So the book is called *The Accidental President*, and it's a book about a regular person--someone like you or me--who becomes the most powerful man in the history of the world by accident. And those are his words, "By accident." So it's April 12, 1945. Truman has no college degree. He's never been the mayor of a city. He has never been the governor of a state. He's never met Joseph Stalin. He's never met Winston Churchill. He has no experience in political international relations at the highest level. And he's walking in the footsteps of FDR into the White House into the oval office. And we should consider that at the time FDR had been president longer than any other man, and FDR was--there was a poll in 1945 where people are asked who was the most prestigious world leader of all time, and Americans chose FDR, ahead of Abraham Lincoln, who came in second, and Jesus Christ, who came in third.

(Laughter)

Baime: I think, actually, second and third. Reverse that. But FDR was first. FDR dies, and here you have this obscure figure who walked into the White House. He has no knowledge of the inner workings of the White House. He is not much more understanding of the global emergency than your average person who reads the Washington Post or the New York Times or the Chicago Tribune. Meanwhile the president of the United States has no knowledge of the world's greatest secret, which is

the atomic bomb. So, on my website TrumanBook.com I posted a little 3.5-minute documentary that I made to explain what this book is about. And I just want to play you a little chunk, 'cause it's nicely packaged. The book is about the four--*Harry S. Truman and the Four Months that Changed the World*, so it's as much about Harry Truman as it is the four climatic months, the end of WWII. So what is it that happened during these four months? Let's take a listen.

Voiceover Baime: The first four months of Truman's presidency saw the collapse of Nazi Germany, the founding of the United Nations, fire bombings of Japanese cities that killed many thousands of civilians, the liberation of Nazi death camps, the suicide of Adolf Hitler, the assassination of Benito Mussolini, the capture of arch Nazi war criminals. There was the fall of Berlin, victory at Okinawa, and the Potsdam Conference, during which the new president sat at the negotiating table with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin in Soviet-occupied Germany in an attempt to map out a new world. Humanity saw the first atomic explosion, the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the dawn of the cold war and the beginning of the nuclear arms race.

Baime: Okay. The morning of April 13, 1945, Harry Truman shows up for work. Right here. Just how obscure this man was. Let's talk about this. How obscure was Harry Truman taking over for FDR. On this morning, April 13th, Robert Nixon was a White House correspondent at that time. He wrote, "Here was a man who came into the White House almost as though he had been picked at random off the street." The senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan wrote on this day, "The gravest question mark in every American heart is Truman. Can he swing the job?" It's amazing to think that at thirty-three years old, this guy was an obscure farmer with no political experience and no belief that he would ever escape his farm, his family farm in Independence, Missouri. It's also amazing to think, when we think about our president today and how Donald Trump came to office, think about Truman. This is Truman at thirty-eight years old. And if you can see he's in the forefront of the picture here, closest to the camera, and this is his clothing shop in Kansas City, Missouri. He's selling ties and silk underwear. And this store closes in 1922, and he's financially destitute, with no political experience, thirty-eight years old. It's amazing to think that this is the man who takes over for FDR. Here's Truman walking into the oval office on the morning of the 13th. Now how does--okay, so how does he get here? I'm gonna give you two numbers to explain just how obscure he is at this moment and how he gets here. So at the--so basically Truman shocked the nation at the democratic national convention in 1944, here in Chicago. At the time, democratic voters voted that two percent in a poll--two percent of the voters thought that Truman should be the vice president on the '44 ticket with FDR. 'Scuse me. Two percent. Now through this wild--these wild machinations and political mistakes, Truman ends up on the ticket. I go into that in depth in the book obviously, but--now look at this wonderful picture. I love this picture. You see very few pictures of these two men together, 'cause they barely knew each other. So here's FDR and Truman. They're sitting under a magnolia tree that was planted by Andrew Jackson on the white house lawn. They're having sardines and toast and tea. Now think about--here's a number--fifty-five percent of Americans at this time during the height of the 1944 election campaigns--fifty-five percent of Americans could name FDR's running mate. That means forty-five percent had no idea who this person was. Now, during this lunch here, Roosevelt picks up a teapot, and he leans over and tries to pour a cup of tea for the vice presidential candidate. And Truman looks, and he sees that his hand is shaking so much, he can't get the tea in the cup. And this is a moment when he realizes he's going to be president of the United States. And he's completely aghast. He has no knowledge of how he's going to manage this. And he's just hoping in his heart, he's hoping that it's not going to happen, but we know that it does. So what does Truman do? He's vice

presidential candidate for eighty-two days, FDR dies, he gets thrust into office. Now I'm gonna make a point. This is the point of this first chapter of my chat. What does he do? He has no knowledge of what's going on. What he does is, he relies on these principles that he has, his mother's teachings. These ideas that he learned as a kid growing up on a farm in Missouri. Right? Honesty is the best policy. Remember that? How often do we hear today our leaders in Washington say, "Oh, by the way, honesty is the best policy." (Laughter)

Baime: How about this one: lead by example. How about make yourself useful. How about teach by example, do the right thing. So this man, he didn't have knowledge and understanding of how this was all gonna work, but he had this toolbox of these values and principles, and these were the things that were gonna carry him through. It was like a human constitution, like the fabric of a man. It was built into him by his mother. So he shows up in the White House, and I spend a lot of time discussing April 13th, what his first day in the White House is like. And he's a stranger, and we have the--the diaries of all the staff members that were working there, and they're all terrified. They're thinking, "What's gonna happen next?" We don't know who this guy is. And they begin--'scuse me--through these diaries, they begin to form an opinion of him. And I'm gonna read some of them to you. First point I'm gonna make, I forgot this point. He puts a sign on his desk, and it says, "Always do right. This will gratify some people, and astonish the rest." Does anybody know who said that? Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest. I gave this talk at the Truman Library last week, and everybody knew the answer, because Mark Twain is from Missouri. Ah, it's Mark Twain. He has a quotation, and he puts this quotation in a leather portfolio on his desk, and every now and then these people in the White House, they see him pull this quote out and looks at it and puts it back. And they're like, "What's he doing?" and it says, always--it says, "I do the very best I know how, the very best I can, and I mean to keep doing so to the end." That's Abraham Lincoln. So these are his--this is his toolbox. He goes to work. He rolls up his sleeves; he goes to work. That's one of the things about Truman is, he worked so hard that in the diaries of people around him, they're always describing him with his jacket off and his sleeves up. Which, I love that--working hard. So, some impression of people that are forming around him. Here's the state department's second in command, Joseph Grew. This is in a letter that he wrote to a friend five weeks into the Truman administration. He says, "Nothing but the most favorable reaction. I think he is going to measure up splendidly to the tremendous job which faces him." Notoriously cranky chief of staff, White House Chief of Staff Admiral William Leahy wrote, "He proved to be easy to work with and one of the nicest people I have ever known." And this one is my favorite one. Assistant Press Secretary Eben Ayers. Anybody here can go on Amazon and buy Eben Ayers' diary, and it's fascinating. He's the assistant press secretary, so he a lot to do. He's sitting in his office writing like, "This is what's going on in the White House." And it's a published diary. You can buy it for a penny on Amazon. He writes on May 12th, so just five--exactly one month into the administration, "He is capable, and an extremely fine gentleman, for whom everyone has the highest regard." So how do we go, in one month, from, "The gravest question mark in every human heart is Truman. Can he swing the job," to, "An extremely fine gentleman for whom everyone has the highest regard?" And I come back to that sign on his desk. Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest. Truman would like to say I want to live up to my mother's teachings. People in Washington quickly realized that this was a man they could trust to store this incredible amount of power. That's how you earn respect in Washington. Okay. This is an amazing photograph. This is chapter two of my chat here. This is a picture of a very, very important moment in history. Now I'm gonna come back to this, 'cause I want to talk about how Truman dealt with the press and how he regarded the press. And his

first press conference. It's a very dramatic moment. This is a different moment, and I'm gonna come back to this at the end. Truman held his first conference on the 16th, I believe, so on his fourth full--no, it was the 17th. It was a Tuesday, his fifth full day in office. And you have to imagine at the time there's no social media, here's no TV cameras. There's no cell phones. There's nothing like that. What people had at the time was radios and newspaper. So newspaper reporters had a very important job at the time. So for Truman's first press conference, 348 reporters show up. It was a record number. If anybody has ever seen what the oval office looks like, it's very small. Relatively speaking. So there are people, looking in through windows. There's people in the hallway, and they're taking notes. And they all want to size up the president. I'm gonna read to you just a little piece here. So—"Good morning." We have the transcript of course. "Good Morning," Truman says. "Good Morning. Good morning, Mr. President." And Truman is sitting there thinking, "They're calling me Mr. President. I can't believe this." "Will you take it sort of slow for us today, please, sir?" Someone says. "Surely," Truman says. "Surely." No one in the room could help make comparisons to Roosevelt, because Roosevelt had been president longer than any man, and this was Truman's fourth full day in office, or fifth or whatever. One thing they noticed is that Truman was standing up, and that was something, right? One of the White House correspondents at the time wrote this of this moment: "We all knew that Roosevelt had gone to Groton and then Harvard, that Roosevelt had come from a quite old, well-to-do family, that he moved in what is known as the best circles all of his life. Truman was a small-town Midwestern Missourian of farm origin. The contrast was in appearance and voice mannerisms and even their attire. President Roosevelt, while a casual dresser, was very well tailored. Truman dressed like he had just come off of Main Street in Independence. Now, what happened that day, Truman starts talking, and people are amazed, because, one, he's remarkably good at connecting with people. Two, he answers questions when he is asked. Roosevelt would take this cigarette holder and wave everybody to sleep like he's conducting this somnolent orchestra and never answer a question. Truman would answer it, and if he couldn't answer it, he'd say, "I can't answer the question." And he was funny. And at the end of the press conference, the 348 reporters erupt in spontaneous applause. It's this extraordinary moment for him. Now, the point I want to make here is that Truman had a tumultuous relationship with the press throughout his time--his many--his seven-plus years in office. But the press loved him, the reporters loved him, and they respected him. Cabell Phillips, who was a New York Times correspondent for twenty-six years--he later wrote, "No president of the last fifty years was so widely and warmly liked as Mr. Truman." At one point, Truman was at such odds with the press that he compared them to prostitutes--reporters to prostitutes--in a private diary entry. He was always fighting with these people, but they loved him. Why? One thing we should understand, and I think this is relevant today--as a reporter I can tell you--in the world of fake news, this is very delicate issue for reporters. You have to imagine what the press was like then. This is really interesting to me. Imagine a press that would cover a presidency like Roosevelt's, and there was a tacit understanding that nobody would say anything about his disability. You can look through the newspapers, and you'll never see a picture of Roosevelt in his wheelchair, and you'll never find anybody allude to the fact that he was disabled. Imagine that today. Imagine if there was a president in the wheelchair today. What would happen? You'd have half the press talking about his disability just to make him look weak, and the other half saying that his disability was a hoax and fake news. Right? That's what would happen if this was going on today. At the time, the press had a respect for the president, Roosevelt, but also for the presidency. That's lost. That's gone. Now, back to Truman. Truman understood the critical role that the press plays in our democracy. Free press is an imperative. It's part of

our checks and balances. It's part of our constitution. Without free press, you have autocracy and dictatorship, which Truman once wrote, "When our forefathers established special guarantees for the freedom of the press, they did so not for the personal aggrandizement of the publishers, but to serve the public." And the other reason the press loved Truman is 'cause he didn't lie to them. During the first week of his administration, Truman wrote this wonderful letter to his mother, and he's explaining what he's doing. It's a remarkable letter. It's so wonderful to read. One of the things he says in there is, "I told my press secretary that all of my family tells the truth all the time." And he wasn't lying. He wouldn't lie to his mom. It was those simple 19th century rural American values. Again, that's how you earn respect in Washington. Now let me come back to this for a second. This is an amazing moment. This is actually at the end of the book, 'cause this is a book about four months of time. This here is August 14th at seven--just minutes after 7pm. The gentleman sitting right behind Truman is the secretary of state James Byrnes. And Byrnes had just received a document--a signed unconditional surrender of Japan. He had motored as fast as he could across Washington and put this document in the president's hand, and Truman is now holding it. So what Truman is holding in his hand is this signed document of the unconditional surrender of Japan, and the end of WWII, and the end of the greatest catastrophe of humankind. Pictured at the center is Bess Truman, the first lady. And one thing you find in my book is, she doesn't look terribly happy. This is about the happiest she was in 1945. This is it. This is as happy as she got, 'cause she never wanted to be the first lady, and she never wanted her husband to be the president. I'm gonna slip this in elegantly, because reading the newspapers these days, it's such an amazing thing that's happening in terms of gender politics right now. It's really amazing to see. And you can tell a lot about a man by the way he treats women. And there's a theme in this book, having read Truman's diaries and his letters to his mother and his sister. The most important people in his life are his mother, his sister, his wife, and his daughter. And there's such unconditional love there. And I try to make this in the book a real understanding of the human and not just the president, okay. So at the center is Bess Truman here, and let me read this quote, because I love it. It's on page ninety-one. I'll dig it up real fast. Okay, this is someone who worked for Truman who wrote in a diary entry--actually this is an oral history--wrote, "I just always had the impression that Mrs. Truman came first, and her happiness was very important to him. That wasn't true of all the senators on the hill." Respect for women. Right. Okay. Another amazing moment. Try to put yourself in this person's shoes right now. It's April 16th. It's a Monday. It's Truman's fourth full day as president. He never thought--he never imagined himself in this position. Never wanted to be in this position. This is a Monday. During the Saturday and Sunday before this was a long funeral procession, and etcetera, ceremonies for Roosevelt. The Monday after Truman gets up on the stage here, and his role is to inspire confidence in his administration for the American people, for the American military fighting overseas, for the Allies, for everybody. He realized the entire weight of the nation is on him, and he has to get up here and make this speech. He knew he was never a very good public speaker. He was very good at connecting people, but he was not a good public speaker. He knew this. And he's terribly nervous. He gets up on the stage, and he starts in. He's so nervous, he just starts talking. And the speaker of the house runs in and says, "Harry, Harry. Hold on, I have to introduce you." And it's this great moment because, the speaker of the house, Sam Rayburn, forgets to call Harry Truman President. Because nobody can look at Harry Truman and think that's the president. So he says, "Hold on, Harry, I have to introduce you." And he turns around and says, "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States," and everybody rose. Truman looks up into the gallery like this, and he sees his wife, as I see mine. And Bess is crying. Why sit he first lady crying? You know, first of all

let's remember that the nation is in shock. Secondly, as we know from Margaret Truman's memoirs, she's very afraid, 'cause she thinks--even the first lady is concerned--that Harry Truman doesn't have the chops to do the job. So can you imagine having to go up on the stage and inspire confidence in the whole world that the clocks in America are gonna continue to turn, and the military--they can trust that America was still America, and even his wife doubts him. And he has to give a speech. So let's listen in here.

Voice of Harry Truman: Both Germany and Japan can be certain beyond any shadow of a doubt that America will continue to fight for freedom until no vestige of resistance remains.

(Recorded applause)

Voice of Truman: Our demand has been, and it remains, unconditional surrender.

Baime: Now we've talked about the image that the press formed of Truman, and also of the White House staff. People like that. Now I want to talk about the American people, all of us. Imagine if the president suddenly died, and there was a new president, and we didn't know who he was. So all of us are gonna form quick opinions, right? This was his debut on the public stage. And one fact I can give you, which I think is extraordinary--the stock market soared on Monday afternoon. Isn't that fascinating? Stock market soared--why? Because this man, he did okay. He pulled it off. He pulled it off. He inspired confidence in America that he could do the job. One of the things that I find so endearing about this moment is that people found that this man--this was somebody that they could relate to. The New Yorker wrote this story that was remarkable right after this, and there's this wonderful quote where the New Yorker says, "Franklin Roosevelt was for the people. Harry Truman IS the people." The quote goes on to say you go--you know, you get on a bus, and Harry Truman's at the wheel. You go to a grocery store or you can go to the pharmacy, Harry Truman is behind the--he was a man of the people. This is someone that Americans could relate to, and that was extremely important. Another important point--now, again, there's no television, there's no social media, and people are dying to find out more about who this guy is. And so if you look at the newspapers during that first week in the middle of April, there are these huge pages-long biographies about this man. Reporters are trying to tell America who he was. And he had served on the--in WWI and had led troops into battle. He was a soldier. He had been a soldier in war, and this was wartime. And this was the new president of the United States. Americans had--it gave them great comfort to understand that this man had led troops into battle, that he was a true patriot. Okay. So Americans are learning about Truman. Two months into his presidency, there's a national poll, and sixty-three percent of Americans think that this guy should be the democratic candidate in 1948, and that's extraordinary because two months earlier, nobody knew who he was. And what's more extraordinary, it wasn't just sixty-three percent, but the second guy was Henry Wallace, forty points behind. So America had embraced this man. He had inspired them. In the same poll Americans were asked to choose words to describe their new leader, and here are some of them. Americans thought that Harry Truman was fair-minded. He was a hard worker. He was a realist who looks at things squarely and seeks good advice. This is my favorite--he has no crackpot ideas.

(Laughter)

Baime: Now, three months into a new administration, a Gallup poll sets Truman's approval rating at eighty-seven percent. Imagine those numbers today. That's higher than Roosevelt had ever achieved ever. And he's three months in. At the time that story comes out, he's on the USS Augusta, and he's sailing to Europe to meet with Churchill and Stalin and map out the future of the world. At that time he gets this memo from Sam Rosenman, special council in the White House, very important man, and it said,

"America is expecting you to bring something home to them." So there's this tremendous amount of pressure on Truman to go to Potsdam and sit down with Stalin and Churchill and map out the future of the world in a way that would be good for the United States, all the American people. Tremendous amount of pressure on him. Meanwhile he gets this story, eighty-seven percent approval rating. Ten percent were undecided. There were only three percent of Americans that did not approve of the job that their president was doing. Three percent. Imagine those numbers today. That's how you earn respect in Washington. Which brings us back to this. Now, this is a picture of the Trinity shot. This is July 16, 1945. It's in New Mexico. It's just before dawn. This is the dawn of a nuclear age, the very split-second moment. Now amazingly at that time, Truman is in Potsdam, and he's meeting Churchill for the first time. So because of the time difference, these two things are happening at almost the exact same moment. So Churchill walks away with this wonderful--Churchill was very upset that FDR--he was his good friend, and Truman felt like an interloper. Who is this guy Truman? After the first meeting, Churchill walks away very happy with Mr. Truman, and happy that all of our agreements were gonna continue. But it is amazing that Churchill --I mean, Churchill and Truman clink whiskey glasses at almost the exact same moment as this has happened. That's the Nagasaki bomb. Now, we know Truman--if he's known for anything, it's for the bomb, right? The US Department of Energy has estimated that the first bomb, the Hiroshima--just one of them--killed over 200,000 people. Just one of them. This is without a doubt still today the most controversial decision that any president has ever had to make. Here's a statement that didn't go well in Kansas City. If we had lost the war, Harry Truman would have been executed for war crimes, right? If we had lost the war, that's what would have happened. As it is, we won. It's incredible to think that Truman became president on April 12, 1945, and had no knowledge at that time of the secret weapon. Now, on April 12th, the night just after he takes oath, the secretary of war sits down with--Mr. Stimson sits down with the president--the new president--and says, "Oh, by the way, we have this weapon. This--you know, it's a secret weapon. That's all I can tell you now." And Truman is befuddled. He has a lot to think about. He just became president. The next day, his first day in office, James Byrnes comes to the White House, meets with the president, and says, "Oh, by the way, there's this secret weapon you should know about." And Byrnes says something really interesting. He says, "I think it may have political potential as well as military," which is a really interesting point. He thinks that this weapon is gonna have--enable the United States to call some shots with the Soviet Union once the war is done. But that's all he says, and again, Truman is befuddled. On April 25th, so it's his thirteenth full day in office, the secretary of war Henry Stimson and General Leslie Groves come to the White House for a secret meeting to brief the president on the Manhattan project. At that time, the secretary of war comes holding this document in his hand. It says at the top, "Memorandum, discussed with the president April 25, 1945." This is another picture of that document. It begins, "Within four months, we shall in all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history, one bomb of which can destroy a whole city." Truman is at Potsdam. The critical days for the bomb were the 24th to the 26th--actually the 24th to the end of the month. The 24th of July. This is his diary. It's this day on the twenty--this is diary of the 25th. He meets with the secretary of war on the 24th, and he writes of that meeting here. "The weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10th. I have told the secretary of war Mr. Stimson to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target, and not women and children." Now surely Truman knew, although he's writing this in his diary, that if he drops this bomb on the Japanese city, it's not--the bomb is not gonna run around and choose who's a soldier and not a child. Surely he knows. This is about the most moving document that I've ever seen. When you look at this, you can't--you can't not feel, a lot. It

says, "Big bomb dropped on Hiroshima, August 5 at 7:15 pm Washington time. First reports indicate complete success, which was even more conspicuous than earlier test. So this is one of two documents that Truman is given while he's onboard the USS Augusta going home to the United States from the Potsdam conference. This is how he knows that the bomb's a success-I think it's important to realize that we really didn't know if the gadget was gonna work, even though there had been a test, the firing mechanism on this bomb was different from the one on the Trinity shot. So he's intensely curious as he's riding home on the Augusta. He doesn't know if it's gonna work. He finds out it works. Here's a picture of Hiroshima. Now numerous critics--what do people say, the people who disagree with this decision? Well, they say that Japan was about to surrender. That's the argument we hear the most. Japan was going to surrender. Why did we drop this bomb? They were gonna surrender anyway. Another one was there was gut reaction racism that Americans had toward the Japanese. We know this to be true. You can look at the--read the newspapers and the magazines and the diaries of the American leader at the time, and of course that's true. Did that play into our decision to use the bomb? We know--this is probably the most important argument--that the bomb was less about finishing the war than it was about Para politics, about sending a warning shot over the bow of the Soviet Union during the first days of the Cold War. Also was the bomb used at a certain time to end the war as fast as possible to stop the Soviet Union from moving into the Far East 'cause we thought we would never get their influence out of the Far East, right? Now what did Truman think? Let me reduce the decision as I see it, having done years of research. And I think that the decision was far more simple than we can imagine. The most controversial decision that any president has ever made, I think, was fairly simple. Firstly, understand, everybody in his inner circle recommended using it. Everyone. There was not one dissent. Number two, Japan had shown at Iwo Jima and Okinawa that they refused to surrender. General Marshall wrote after the war of the March 9th and 10th fire bombing of Japan--the really famous firing bombing of Japan in which 100,000 people died in one night. This was a month before Truman became president. It was under Roosevelt. General Marshall later wrote, "We had had 100,000 people killed in Tokyo in one night. One night of bombing, and it had seemingly no affect whatsoever. It destroyed the Japanese cities, yes, but the morale was not affected, as far as we could tell. Not at all." Now the Potsdam ultimatum--we had given Japan an ultimatum. We had given them an opportunity to surrender. The governments of the United States, the United Kingdom, and China had come up with this document, delivered it, and it said, "The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction." The ultimatum called for unconditional surrender. The fascinating thing about that document is, if we had taken the word "unconditional" out of that document, Japan might have surrendered, and the bombings never would have happened. And Truman had to decide what would happen if he went back to the United States after Potsdam and reported to the American people that we had accepted anything but unconditional surrender from the Japanese. There would have been a huge political uproar. It would have been considered a stab in the back of the dead President Roosevelt. And his advisors advised him not to take the word "unconditional" out of the document. So it's amazing to think that one word--hundreds of thousands of lives. Hinged on that one word. Probably. Now here's a final point we were planning an invasion of Japan. There was a June 18th meeting. The minutes are online. They're fascinating, and you can read them. We were planning to invade Japan. 766,700 Americans were going to get sent into the Japanese mainland to battle it out. During that meeting on June 18th, the president--the secretary of war raised his hand and said, "There's a lot of people in Japan that don't want this war. But if we invade Japan's homeland, women and children will take up arms and fight us to the last square foot." It was gonna be an awful, brutal battle. So Truman does the

math. It's that simple. The role of the bomb would not be to kill, but to save lives. He later wrote, "It occurred to me that a quarter of a million of the flower of our manhood were worth a couple Japanese cities, and I still think they were and are." Churchill later wrote that the supernatural weapon could mean, quote, "the end of the war in one or two violent shocks. We might not merely destroy cities, but save the lives of friends and foes." So Churchill is saying we might even save Japanese lives. Now how can we know if that's true? We can't. We can never know. In fact, we do know the bombs ended the war. And here's the point I want to make about this particular subject. The secretary of war wrote after the bombings, "the face of war is the face of death. The decision to use the atomic bomb was a decision that bought death to over 100,000 Japanese people. No explanation can change that fact, and I do not wish to gloss over it, but this deliberate premeditated destruction was our least abhorrent choice." Now the point--I seize on those last few words, our least abhorrent choice. When Truman left office, his approval ratings were miserable. And you look back at his presidency, and you see this man who constantly had to make decisions based on a least abhorrent choice. What do we do--should we invade Korea? There was no right or wrong, there was no good or bad, there was only the least abhorrent choice. Now I can't end this with saying, that's how you earn respect in Washington, because there's probably people here who think, well, that was murder of women and children. And there's probably people here that think that that decision was bad. But I can say that's what leaders do. They make the most difficult decisions, and they live with them for the rest of their lives. Now, I'm gonna wrap this up with a couple of thoughts. Right now we're facing a situation that is the most critical situation politically that I feel that I've experienced in my lifetime. If you read--you know, I wake up and I read about North Korea in the paper, and I feel terrified. I have children. It worries me. And I think that it's remarkable how relevant what Truman experienced, for so many reasons--void of what we're experiencing now--you have an accidental president-- president who's never been the mayor of a city, who's never been the governor of a state, who's thrust into this situation at a critical moment in world history. The nation is at war. We have a downturn in our relations in Moscow. What do we do? We have this situation in the Far East, and people are aiming atomic bombs at each other. What are we gonna do? And if I can send a message, I think that this is a really important moment for the United Nations. Something that happens in this book--Truman is two months into his presidency, three months, and he goes out to San Francisco, and he gives this speech at the closing of the United Nations ceremony. Fifty nations representing eighty-five percent of the world's population at that time. And Truman goes to the senate--the United States senate-- and says, "Ratify this treaty." This is a world police organization that is gonna enforce peace. This is an organization created to confront situations, the likes of which we have right now. UN, we've heard UN sanctions, right? That's great. We heard that Roosevelt placed sanctions against the Japanese, and historians have said that's one of the reasons Pearl Harbor happened. Sanctions aren't the answer. It's time for the United Nations to stand up and do something and make a statement saying that we're going to maybe even negotiate with these people. Right? When you read the paper, you think, like, we're refusing to negotiate with gangsters. That's essentially what the message is. That's the job of the United Nations, isn't it? To negotiate with anybody, to diffuse situations like this. I'm gonna end with a quote. Three months into the Truman era, the Washington Post described the country's reaction to him in a story called "Whole Nation Reflects Era of Good Feeling Inspired By President." And that story begins like this: "The mood of the United States is one of extraordinary friendliness. Americans appear to be more at ease with each other. They're more inclined to talk about national affairs and less inclined to argue. In short,

there's a cordiality in the air that this country hasn't known in years." So I feel like we could use some Truman right now.

(Applause)

1: You said that Truman fought with the press all the time. Did he appreciate the fact that they liked them?

Baime: I think, yeah, I think he did. There was a lot of camaraderie there, and as happens, they butt heads. And he had very good friends. There's these great moments-- Truman was a poker player, and he would invite members of the press to his private games of poker. And the stories are fascinating. I encourage you to read an oral history of Robert Noxon, who was this White House correspondent who was invited to all the games, and his descriptions of Truman are wonderful. So there was camaraderie there, but these people--you know, they had a contemptuous relationship for a reason. There's a very famous letter. This had--my book is about the first four months of Truman's administration, but a lot of us know the story of the--I think, the journalist's name was Hyde. Anybody? Hyde. There's this great moment--Truman's daughter wanted to be a singer, and she gave a concert, and somebody wrote a bad review, and Truman wrote this scathing letter to this reporter who wrote a bad review of his daughter. And this got out in the press like, what an un-presidential thing to do. Can you imagine? How un-presidential. But I think there was a tremendous amount of respect there.

2: Did president Truman give the--give Japan an opportunity to surrender right after the first bombing before the second one?

Baime: That's a very good question. And the answer is, no. We were hoping--he was hoping there would be a surrender. And in a way I think that your question was almost like, why was there a second bomb? And I think the answer is because there--by the way, there was no order for a second bomb. And there's this moment in the book when he finally gets home from Potsdam, and I set out the time and figured out what he was doing when the mission was flown. And he's writing checks. He had been away for a month, and his wife was away. There was no order to drop the second bomb, and in fact while the mission was flown he was actually writing checks to--for White House groceries. And he didn't--had no knowledge that the mission was being flown when it was. Right after the second bomb, of course, there was a surrender--no, that's not true. Right after the second bomb, we were still waiting, and there was a congressman named Trousdale who wrote to the president and said, "We need to continue dropping these bombs until they surrender unconditionally," and Truman wrote back that he couldn't stand killing more women and children. And those documents are on the Truman website, on the Truman Library website; they're right there. They're very interesting.

3: How did FDR find Truman, and why did he agree to run?

Baime: That's a great question. George Allen was the head of the democratic national committee. And he wrote a memoir about the 1944 convention, that happened here in Chicago, where Truman ends up on the ticket. And George Allen says that historians will be writing about this forever because no one can agree how this happened. And in fact FDR said not long before Truman ends up on the ticket that he said, "I hardly know Truman." There's a very important meeting in the White House soon before the convention where all these democratic leaders gather, and they're trying to figure out who the vice presidential candidate is gonna be. And there's this unspoken, this big elephant in the room because a lot of the people feel like, well, FDR's health is so bad, so whoever the vice president is gonna be is going to be the president. It's the unspoken word in the room. And they go through all of the names. And each one of them--of these far more qualified candidates--has a problem. So James Byrnes was probably the most qualified, but he had--he came from the South, South Carolina, and FDR is worried that African Americans are not gonna vote for the ticket if James Byrnes is on it. And Byrnes

had been a Catholic, and he left the Catholic Church to marry a protestant. So thinking Catholics aren't gonna vote for the--so--four our ticket if Byrnes is on it. So he crosses Byrnes off the list. Then there's Henry Wallace, who had been the previous vice president. And Wallace was this wild lefty that everybody thought was this crazy mystic, and they were very concerned about him. So they crossed his name off the list. And then there was Alben Barkley, another great, very qualified man, who ended up being Truman's vice president later, but he had an argument with Roosevelt, and so his name got crossed off the list. And they got to Truman, and everybody said, "Well, Mr. Truman has no enemies," and that was it. And so they called him the Missouri Compromise. Truman it was.

Clarke: Thank you very much.

Baime: Thank you.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you to AJ Baime for an outstanding discussion, and to Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and members of the Museum and Library for sponsoring this program. The book is, *The Accidental President: Harry S. Truman and the Four Months that Changed the World*, and it's published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. To learn more about the publisher, visit HMHCO.com. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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(Theme music)

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(Theme music)

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