

Einstein's Letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt

Manhattan Project History The Early Years (1900 - 1939)

"I really only acted as a mail box. They (Szilard, et al) brought me a finished letter and I simply signed it" - Albert Einstein in a apology to his biographer Antonina Vallentin.

In later years, those close to Einstein would report that he was very troubled by his participation. In a tragic paradox of fate, he, a vowed pacifist, gave the starting signal for the most horrible of weapons of destruction.

Webmaster's Note: Keeping in mind what you have learned thus far, it is important to realize that not only was the scientific community as a whole acutely aware of the possibilities of atomic energy, it was also actively discussed in American magazines and newspapers. In addition, the scientists that had fled Nazi persecution were worried that their former scientific collaborators would actively pursue the possibility of atomic weapons. This led Leo Szilard, with the assistance of Eugene Wigner and Edward Teller, to approach his friend, Albert Einstein, and encourage him to communicate a "sense of urgency" to President Roosevelt.

Alexander Sachs, a friend and unofficial advisor to Roosevelt, was tapped to carry Einsteins' letter. However, for a variety of reasons, Sachs was not able to meet with F.D.R. and deliver the letter until October 11, 1939

Roosevelt wrote Einstein back on October 19th and informed him that he had set up a committee consisting of Sachs and representatives from the Army and Navy to study uranium. Events ultimately proved that the President was a man of considerable action once a course of action was chosen. In fact, Roosevelt's approval of the Uranium Committee in October of 1939, based on his belief that the United States could not take the risk of allowing Hitler to achieve unilateral possession of "extremely powerful bombs," was merely the first decision among many that ultimately led to the establishment of the only atomic bomb effort that succeeded in World War II - the Manhattan Project.

August 2, 1939

Albert Einstein
Old Grove Rd.
Nassau Point
Paconic, Long Island, NY

F. D. Roosevelt
President of the United States
White House
Washington, DC

Sir:

Some recent work by E. Fermi and L. Szilard, which has been communicated to me in a manuscript, leads me to expect that the element uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the immediate future. Certain aspects of the situation which has arisen seem to call for watchfulness and, if necessary, quick action on the part of the Administration. I believe therefore that it is my duty to bring to your attention the following facts and recommendations.

In the course of the last four months it has been made probable - through the work of Joliot in France as well as Fermi and Szilard in America - that it may become possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium, by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated. Now it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future.

This new phenomenon would also lead to the construction of bombs, and it is conceivable - though much less certain - that extremely powerful bombs of a new type, may thus be constructed. A single bomb of this type, carried by boat and exploded in a port, might very well destroy the whole port together with some of the surrounding territory. However, such bombs might very well prove to be too heavy for transportation by air.

Page 2...

The United States has only very poor areas of uranium in moderate quantities. There is some good ore in Canada and the former Czechoslovakia, while the most important source of uranium is the Belgian Congo.

In view of this situation you may think it desirable to have some permanent contact maintained between the Administration and the group of physicists working on chain reactions in America. One possible way of achieving this

might be for you to entrust with this task a person who has your confidence and who could perhaps serve in an unofficial capacity. His task might comprise the following:

a) to approach Government Departments, keep them informed of the further development, and put forward recommendations for Government action, giving particular attention to the problem of securing a supply of uranium ore for the United States.

b) to speed up the experimental work, which is at present being carried on within the limits of the budgets of University laboratories, by providing funds, if such funds be required, through his contacts with private persons who are willing to make contributions for this cause, and perhaps also by obtaining the co-operation of industrial laboratories which have the necessary equipment.

I understand that Germany has actually stopped the sale of uranium from the Czechoslovakian mines which she has taken over. That she should have taken such hasty action might perhaps be understood on the ground that the son of the German Under-Secretary of State, von Weiznacker, is attached to the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute in Berlin where some of the American work on uranium is now being repeated.

Yours very truly,

(Albert Einstein)