

The Decision to Use the Bomb

Name _____

The modern nuclear arsenals and the struggle to control nuclear weaponry have brought new significance and controversy to the American use of the atomic bomb in World War II. There is considerable debate among historians about the necessity of using the bomb to force Japan's surrender; there is perhaps even greater controversy concerning the moral principle involved in subjecting the two Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to this weapon. This latter point is raised, but not answered, at the end of the essay.

World War II was the second world-wide war in less than a generation's time. The World War I had erased any romantic illusions about the nature of modern war; World War II saw the complete mobilization of entire populations and economies in the waging of the war. It was fought with grim determination on every side. In such conditions, each side carried out acts of great brutality in the frustration and necessity of achieving victory.

For the first time outside a civil war, fighting spread beyond the armies to whole populations: Hitler used aerial bombing to try to break the spirit of the British; the Japanese used aerial bombing and soldiers against the Chinese civilian population; both Japan and Germany used their military forces to subdue resistance in occupied nations; and the allied forces used bombing to carry the war beyond the battle front and break the opposition of enemy populations. By the end of the war, technology had advanced to the point where such bombings were terrible: the allied bombing of Dresden killed tens of thousands of people, and the American firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945 probably killed more than 100,000 people.

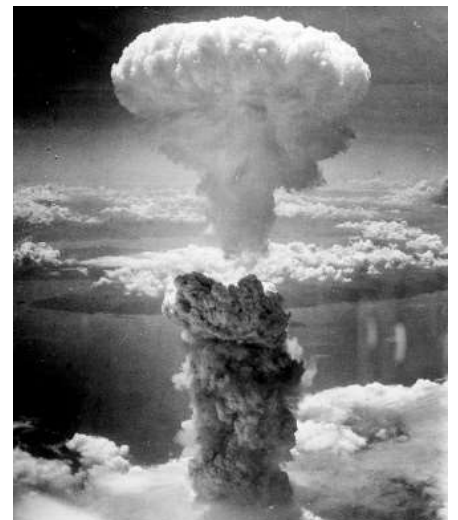
During this period, wartime technology raced ahead, as each side attempted to be the first to develop the techniques and equipment that would enable it to win. Many nations sought to decipher the secrets of atomic energy, but the United States was the first to develop the ultimate weapon, the atomic bomb.

Prelude to the Bomb: On April 1, 1945, the Allies invaded the southern Japanese island of Okinawa, and their victory there after bitter and bloody fighting with heavy losses on both sides proved that Japan could not win the war. It also proved, however, that invasion of the Japanese homeland would cause massive casualties on both sides. As American ground forces swept Okinawa clean of Japanese troops, the local civilians were caught in the middle. Subjected to gun fire, bombing, and infantry combat by the American advance, they were prevented from surrendering by the Japanese troops. Okinawa only served to confirm everyone's idea of how the final battle for the main islands of Japan would be fought.

The surrender of Okinawa caused the Japanese cabinet to collapse and a new, pro-peace prime minister and foreign minister pressed the army to allow negotiations. The Japanese military, however, trapped in its own mystique of rigid determination and self-sacrifice in the name of the nation and emperor, insisted on strict terms.

Just at this point, the atomic bomb became a reality. The first successful test of the atomic weapon was held on July 16, 1945. The United States now had the choice of using it to try to end the war in another way. All other forms of attack, from the grim battle for Okinawa to the terrible firebombing of Japan's cities, had failed to deter the leaders in Tokyo. Perhaps the atomic bomb would resolve the crisis without a need for invasion. President Truman, who had already left for Potsdam to meet with Churchill and Stalin, left instructions that the bomb was not to be used against Japan until after the Allies had agreed on and issued a declaration.

The Potsdam Declaration of July 26, issued by the Allied powers and calling for "unconditional surrender," was not acceptable to the Japanese military, despite the declaration's threat that failure to surrender would be met by "complete destruction" of the military and the "utter devastation of the Japanese home land."



Hiroshima and Nagasaki: In May 1945, the Allies defeated Germany, two months before the atomic bomb was complete. War with Japan continued, however, and In August 1945 it seemed that an invasion of Japan itself might be necessary to force the Japanese to surrender. Military advisers to President Harry S. Truman warned that such a ground war would result in the deaths of tens or hundreds of thousands of young men in the US Armed Forces, as well as the deaths of many Japanese military personnel and civilians. After receiving no reply to his threat that "prompt and utter destruction" would follow if the Japanese did not surrender unconditionally, Truman authorized the use of the bomb on Japan.

On August 6, 1945 an American B-29 bomber named the "Enola Gay" dropped the first atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima. The device exploded over the city with a force of 12,500 tons of TNT. "[The city] had been there just a few minutes before . . . but it was absolutely gone," said one witness. About 140,000 people were killed instantly or died due to injury or radiation poisoning within months of the blast at Hiroshima. It was reported the next day to the Japanese Army General Staff that "the whole city of Hiroshima was destroyed instantly by a single bomb."

Truman called for surrender the day after the bombing at Hiroshima once more, but once more the Japanese government refused. On August 8 the army was further rocked by the news that the Russians, who had remained neutral to Japan throughout the war, had attacked Japanese forces on the Asian mainland. But despite the prime minister's insistence that Japan must accept surrender, the army insisted on total, last-ditch resistance. The news, midway through this conference, that the city of Nagasaki had also been destroyed by another atomic bomb, did not sway them from their determination. On August 9, about 80,000 people died after the United States dropped a second bomb on the Japanese city of Nagasaki. A total of 210,000 civilians died in the two atomic blasts. (In comparison, the United States had killed 120,000 Japanese civilians with conventional bombs during air raids on Tokyo in March 1945.)

Finally, the Japanese prime minister and his allies agreed that the only course was to have the emperor break the deadlock by expressing his view. The emperor's statement that Japan's suffering was unbearable to him and that he wished for surrender broke the military's opposition and began the process of ending the war in the Pacific. Six days later, the Japanese government signed an unconditional surrender. World War II was over.

The development of the atomic bomb had repercussions that would continue to resonate throughout the twentieth century, particularly in the Cold War. Spies within the research and development facility at Los Alamos—most notably the scientist Klaus Fuchs—gave the Soviet Union information about the nuclear program that helped the Soviets develop their own atomic weapon by 1949

Was the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki necessary? Truman's decision was framed by his belief that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would shorten the war and thereby save the lives of tens or hundreds of thousands of American soldiers as well as untold numbers of Japanese soldiers and citizens.

Was it necessary to use the atomic bomb to force Japan to surrender? This is a subject of heated debate among historians. Some point to the existence of a pro-peace faction in Japan, resisting the army and growing in strength. This faction had already tried to express Japan's interest in peace through the Russians, whom they believed were still neutral. In fact, the Russians had secretly agreed at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 to attack the Japanese. Moreover, Japanese offensive capabilities were exhausted. The navy and air force were almost totally destroyed by the summer of 1945, and the Japanese islands were completely cut off from the rest of the world. The Russian attack of August 8 on Manchuria met little or no resistance.

However, in the years following the war—and to this day—the United States' use of nuclear bombs against the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has had both proponents and detractors. Many questions remain about the necessity of using the bomb and its moral implications: Would the United States have acted so quickly to use nuclear weapons against Europeans? Was racism against the Japanese an element in the decision? Might the United States have exploded a nuclear bomb on an uninhabited island to demonstrate the bomb's terrible power instead of destroying two cities? Might the United States have been able to gain Japan's unconditional surrender by other means?

But there was no question that the development and use of the atomic bomb changed the nature of world warfare forever. Though the bombings of Japan remain the only wartime use of nuclear weapons, since 1945 the threat of nuclear war has loomed over international conflicts, promising a level of "prompt and utter destruction" never before seen in the world.

Reading Questions

1. How did the battle over the island of Okinawa influence the decision to use the atomic bomb?
2. How would you rank, from most important to least important, the several factors or considerations involved in the U.S. decision to drop the atomic bomb? Explain.
3. What might have happened if Nazi Germany had developed a nuclear weapon before the United States?
4. Was the decision to drop the atom bombs on civilians morally justifiable?

Statement by Prime Minister Eisaku Sato at the Budget Committee in the House of Representatives (December 11th, 1967) “My responsibility is to achieve and maintain safety in Japan under the Three Non-Nuclear Principles of not **possessing**, not **producing** and not **permitting** the introduction of nuclear weapons, in line with Japan's Peace Constitution.”

5. Why would Japan be so deeply committed to the “three nuclear principles,” that it will not own or manufacture nuclear weapons and will not allow them to be brought into Japan.