

# Why Did the United States Drop the Atomic Bomb?

## Introduction



President Harry S. Truman

**The war in Europe ended in May 1945 and from that time on, the Pacific war received the full attention of the United States War Department.**

As late as May 1945, the U.S. was engaged in heavy fighting with the Japanese at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. In these most bloody conflicts, the United States had sustained more than 75,000 casualties. These victories insured the United States was within air striking distance of the Japanese mainland.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese to initiate the United States' entrance into the war, just four years before, was still fresh on the minds of many Americans. A feeling of vindication and a desire to end the war strengthened the resolve of the United States to quickly and decisively conclude it.

**President Truman had many alternatives at his disposal for ending the war:**

- invade the Japanese mainland
- hold a demonstration of the destructive power of the atomic bomb for Japanese dignitaries
- drop an atomic bomb on selected industrial Japanese cities
- bomb and blockade the islands
- wait for Soviet entry into the war on August 15
- mediate a compromised peace

Operation Olympia, a full scale landing of United States armed forces, was already planned for Kyushu on November 1, 1945 and a bomb and blockade plan had already been instituted over the Japanese mainland for several months.

The Japanese resolve to fight had been seriously hampered in the preceding months. Their losses at Iwo Jima and Okinawa had been staggering. Their navy had ceased to exist as an effective fighting force and the air corps had been decimated. American B-29's made bombing runs over military targets on the Japanese mainland an integral part of their air campaign. Japan's lack of air power hindered their ability to fight. The uncertainty and the use of devastating city bombings in Europe eventually swayed the military leaders in charge of the Pacific theater to authorize bombing of Japanese mainland cities. Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, and Kobe were all decimated by arson and other bombs. In all, hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed in these air strikes meant to deter the resolve of the Japanese people. Yet, Japanese resolve stayed strong and the idea of a bloody "house to house" invasion of the Japanese mainland would produce thousands more American and Allied casualties. The Allies in late July 1945 declared at Potsdam that the Japanese must unconditionally surrender.

### Task



Photograph of a Nuclear Weapon.

In this activity, you will be asked to analyze a primary source document and answer questions about it. This will give you some background information on the topic. Then you will be asked to examine the reasons for Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan in August 1945. This group activity will allow you to consider his decision, discuss it with others and offer your own viewpoint on the issue.

### The Process

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**Step 1: Analyzing a primary source document**—your group will be given a primary source document. Answer the following questions regarding your document:

1. Who wrote this document?
2. What is the purpose of this document?
3. What date was this document issued?
4. Why is the name of the city left out?
5. Why does the atomic bomb's power have to be explained?
6. Look at the last paragraph of the second page of the press release. What were Truman's plans for ending the war? Did he accomplish those goals in dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Why or why not?
7. On page three, Truman advocates the use of atomic power for world peace. How does he propose to fulfill this goal?
8. What reasons does President Truman use to justify dropping the bomb?

## **Step 2: Four Reasons for Dropping the Atomic Bomb**

According to J. Samuel Walker in his book, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of the Atomic Bomb Against Japan*, Truman justified dropping the bomb with four reasons:

1. it would end the war successfully at the earliest possible moment
2. it justified the effort and expense of building the atomic bombs
3. it offered hope of achieving diplomatic gains in the growing rivalry with the Soviet Union
4. because of America's hatred of the Japanese and a desire for vengeance

## **Step 3: Each group is responsible for one of the reasons. In your groups, answer the following questions on the handout provided:**

- Explain the reason in **your own** words.
- Can you think of any other reasons to justify dropping the atomic bomb?
- Can you think of any reasons why Truman should not have dropped the bomb?
- Do you agree or disagree with President Truman's thinking? Why or why not? Explain.
- You are president of the United States and you have various options for ending the war at your disposal (see page 1). What would you do if you were president and why?

## **Step 4: The reporter will share your groups findings to answers #1, 2, 3, 6 with the rest of the class.**

### **Conclusion**

After Japanese leaders flatly rejected the Potsdam Declaration, President Truman authorized use of the atomic bomb anytime after August 3, 1945. On the clear morning of August 6, the first atomic bomb, nicknamed Little Boy, was dropped on the city of Hiroshima. Leveling over 60 percent of the city, 70,000 residents died instantaneously in a searing flash of heat. Three days later, on August 9, a second bomb, Fat Man, was dropped on Nagasaki. Over 20,000 people died instantly. In the successive weeks, thousands more Japanese died from the after effects of the radiation exposure of the blast. The affects of the atomic bomb continued for decades afterward.

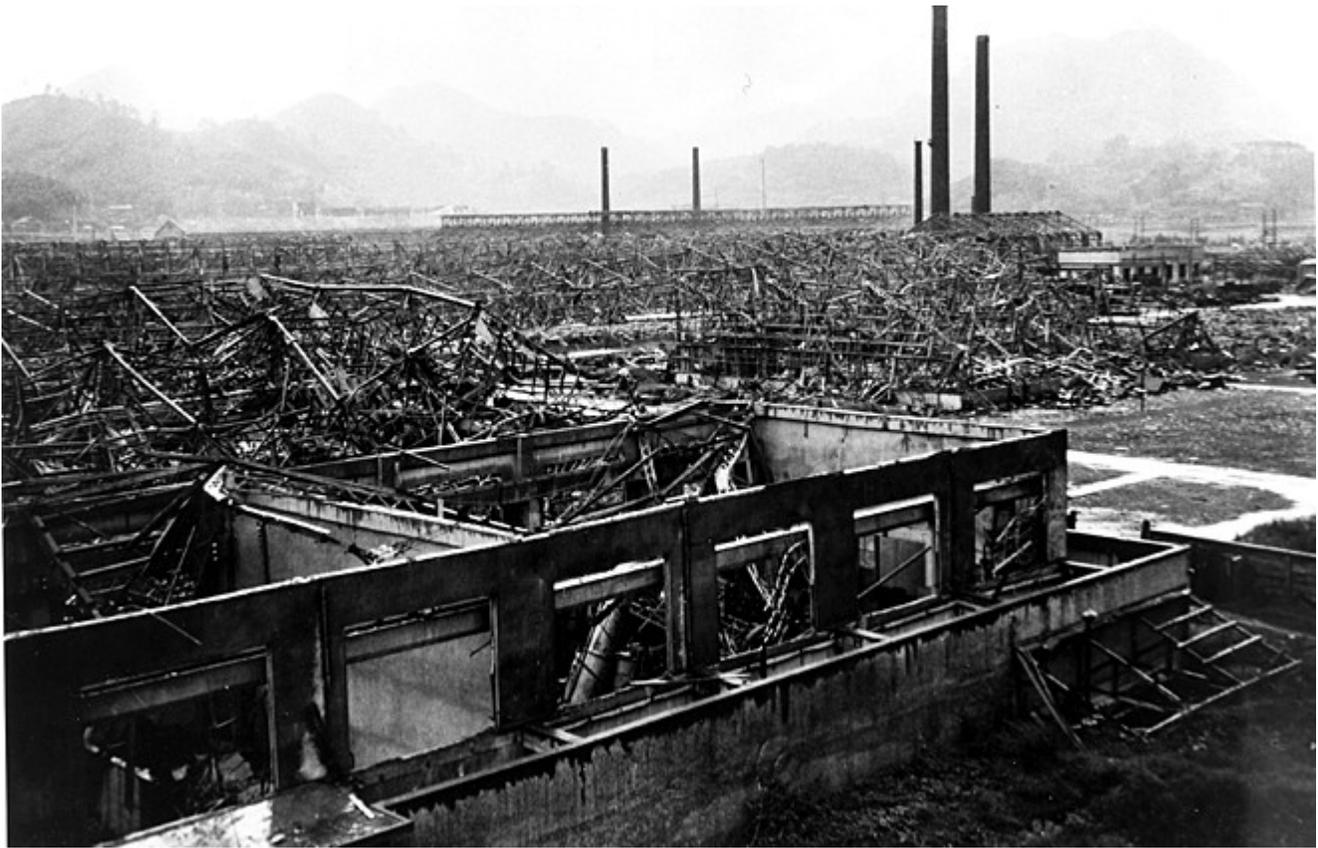
### **Individual Assignment (Homework)**

1. What are the moral implications of the atomic bomb?
2. Why would President Truman be against sharing the secret of the atomic bomb with the world? Why would he support sharing atomic technology with Great Britain and only divulge minor details to the Soviets?
3. General Douglas MacArthur, one time commander of United Nations armed forces during the Korean War, in a 1954 interview stated that he had wanted to drop "between thirty and fifty atomic bombs" on enemy bases before laying radioactive waste material across the northern edge of North Korea during the war. Why did Truman decide not to use the atomic bomb in the Korean War of 1950? How did this precedent dictate warfare in subsequent presidencies?



NAGASAKI STRIKE PHOTO  
9 AUGUST 1945

Photograph of Atomic Explosion over Nagasaki.



Photograph of aftermath of atomic bomb blast, Nagasaki, Japan.

**1. Your groups reason for Truman dropping the atomic bomb:**

**2. Explain the reason in your own words.**

**3. Can you think of any other reasons to justify dropping the atomic bomb?**

**4. Can you think of any reasons why Truman should not have dropped the bomb?**

**5. Do you agree or disagree with President Truman's thinking? Why or why not? Explain.**

**6. You are president of the United States and you have various options for ending the war at your disposal (see page 1). What would you do if you were president and why?**