Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
Barbaric Tactic or Quick Way to End the War?

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The issue: Should the U.S. use the atomic bomb against Japan in an attempt to end World War II? Or should the U.S. pursue another course of action to end the war?

- Arguments in favor of the use of the atomic bomb: Using the atomic bomb against Japan is the most effective means of bringing World War II to an end. All indications show that Japan will fight to the very last man, so a drastic course of action is needed. The main alternative to use of the bomb—a massive invasion of the Japanese home island—would be far too costly in terms of U.S. soldiers' lives. By using the bomb, the U.S. can bring the war to a quick end and save tens of thousands, and perhaps hundreds of thousands, of U.S. lives.

- Arguments against the use of the atomic bomb: The use of such a devastating weapon against a civilian population is immoral and barbaric. Also, the bombings are not necessary; indications show that Japan is pursuing peace negotiations, and the U.S. should allow more time for those negotiations to bear fruit. And in using an atomic weapon, the U.S. will spark a dangerous arms race with the Soviet Union.
Nearly identical mushroom clouds loom over Hiroshima (left) and Nagasaki (right) after the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on these Japanese cities on August 6 and 9, 1945, respectively.

Introduction

On April 24, 1945, less than two weeks after Harry Truman (D, 1945-53) assumed the presidency following the death of President Franklin Roosevelt (D, 1939-45), Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote to him: "I think it is very important that I should have a talk with you as soon as possible on a highly secret matter.... [It] has such a bearing on our present foreign relations and has such an important effect upon all my thinking in this field that I think you ought to know about it without much further delay." Stimson would inform him of the development of an atomic bomb, and less than four months later Truman would have to decide whether to use it against Japan in an attempt to end World War II (1939-45).

Truman did decide to use the bomb, perhaps one of the most momentous decisions in U.S. history. On August 6, 1945, at 8:15 a.m. (local time), the crew of the Enola Gay dropped an atomic bomb over the city of Hiroshima. The bomb detonated 2,000 feet above the center of Hiroshima, destroying 60% of the city (four square miles), and killing an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 people immediately. After the bombing, Truman described the attack as "only a warning of things to come."
Development of the atomic bomb began under Franklin D. Roosevelt (left), and was completed under the administration of Harry S. Truman (right).

Indeed, three days later, a B-29 dropped a second atomic bomb over Nagasaki. The bomb exploded 1,540 feet above the city, killing an estimated 40,000 people and destroying two square miles of the city. Many more people in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki subsequently died of radiation-related illnesses. Altogether, an estimated 242,000 people died as a result of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.

The day after the Nagasaki bombing, Japan offered its surrender, and on August 14 Truman announced to the nation that Japan had surrendered. The treaty was formally signed in early September, bringing an end to World War II, during which the U.S. had suffered roughly one million casualties.
Jeremy Eagle

At the time, it was widely accepted that the bomb was a necessary means to end the war and save the lives of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of U.S. soldiers. In a December 1945 Fortune magazine poll, just 5% of respondents said the U.S. should not have used the bomb, while 54% approved of what had been done and another 23% said they wished the U.S. had dropped more atomic bombs on Japan before its surrender.

However, there were some dissenting voices at the time. In the military, the atom bomb had not been unanimously viewed as the best way to end the war; alternative proposals for ending the war had included large-scale invasion of Japan, continued bombing of cities with conventional explosives, and continuation of
a naval blockade to starve Japan into submission. In retrospect, several historians have challenged the need to drop the bomb, as well as the bomb's role in Japan's surrender.

Should Truman have made the decision to drop the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Or should he have followed another course of action to end the war? Were the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings immoral or necessary?

Supporters of the bombing say that it was the best course of military action. Although Japan was essentially defeated, they argue, all of the indications showed that the Japanese planned to fight to the last man. They point to heavy U.S. losses in battles in the months leading up to Japan's surrender. They also contend that
Japan's surrender was unlikely because the allies were demanding unconditional surrender, including the removal of Emperor Hirohito from the throne. Japan had categorically refused to surrender if the emperor—who was accorded godlike status by the Japanese—was not allowed to remain on the throne.

Furthermore, proponents note, the main alternative to use of the atomic bomb being considered at the time was a mass invasion of the Japanese home islands. They contend that such an invasion would have been very costly in terms of U.S. lives. In using the bomb, supporters say, the U.S. brought the war to a quicker end, saving the lives of perhaps hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers.

Critics of the atomic bombing, on the other hand, argue that it was immoral and barbaric to use such a destructive weapon against a civilian population. They also contend that it was unnecessary because Japan was on the verge of defeat. Evidence shows that in the months leading up to the Hiroshima bombing, Japan was trying to get third parties involved in peace negotiations, opponents assert. Japan would have soon surrendered if the U.S. had kept up with more conventional warfare and allowed time for those peace overtures to bear fruit, they argue.

Others criticize the U.S. for being the first to use an atomic weapon in warfare, ushering in the nuclear age. They argue that, in using the bomb, the U.S. sparked a dangerous nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union for most of the rest of the 20th century.

World War II and the Quest for Peace

The U.S. entered World War II in 1941, two years after France and Britain jointly declared war against Nazi Germany. The war eventually expanded to include many other nations, including German allies Italy and Japan. The U.S. had resisted becoming militarily involved, but declared war on Japan on December 8, the day after a Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor naval base on the Hawaiian island of Oahu killed some 2,300 people.

The war in Europe ended with Germany's surrender on May 7, 1945, but although Japan's navy and air force were largely defeated, Japan refused to surrender. For much of 1945, the U.S. was involved in several costly battles. In the fight on the Japanese island of Iwo Jima in February and March 1945, some 20,000 U.S. soldiers were killed, wounded or missing in action; 41,000 Americans were either killed or wounded during the battle of Okinawa, which took place from April to June; and 31,000 troops were killed or injured in the battle of Luzon (in the Philippines) during the summer of that year. The battles were even more costly for the Japanese; at Luzon, the Japanese suffered five casualties for every U.S. casualty.

As the war in the Pacific continued into the later half of 1945, the U.S. military was planning a large-scale invasion of Japan's home islands as a final push to end the war. Some 767,000 U.S. troops were scheduled to land on the southern island of Kyushu in November 1945 (in "Operation Olympic"). They would make Kyushu an air base for the second stage of the invasion ("Operation Coronet") —invading the main island of Honshu in March 1946 if Japan had not yet surrendered.

However, Truman and other officials were also weighing the possibility of using newly developed atomic bombs against Japan to force its surrender. The U.S. had begun a program to develop an atomic bomb after learning of Germany's efforts to do so in 1939. The U.S. accelerated those efforts after entering the war against Japan, and on July 16, 1945, the first U.S. atomic bomb was successfully tested. [See The Development of the Atomic Bomb (sidebar), Einstein's Letter to Roosevelt Regarding the Development of an Atomic Bomb (primary document)]
In July 1945, Truman, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin met for a conference in Potsdam, Germany, to discuss post-war Europe and military options in Japan. While attending the Potsdam conference, Truman was informed of the successful test of the atomic bomb. On July 25, Truman and Stimson approved a written order for the use of the bomb against Japan. [See Description of the First U.S. Test of an Atomic Weapon (primary document), President Truman's Diary Entry Dated July 25, 1945 (primary document)]

The following day, the allies issued the Potsdam Declaration; while not specifically mentioning the atomic bomb, the declaration demanded that Japan surrender immediately or face "prompt and utter destruction." The allies insisted on Japan's unconditional surrender, which—although not specifically mentioned in the declaration—would include the removal of Hirohito, which the allies saw as necessary to end Japanese militarism. [See Potsdam Declaration (primary document)]

![Enola Gay](http://www.2facts.com.TempFiles/haa00001010.htm)

AFP/Getty Images

In a picture dated August 1945, the crew of the B-29 bomber Enola Gay stands before their plane. This plane dropped the bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.

Japan immediately rejected any surrender that would not leave the emperor on his throne. Less than two weeks later, the Enola Gay dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima. "It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam," Truman said in a statement following the Hiroshima attack (but before the Nagasaki bombing). "Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms, they may expect a rain of ruin from the air the likes of which has never been seen on this earth." [See President Truman's Statement Regarding the Bombing of Hiroshima (primary document)]
Following the Hiroshima bombing, there was no sign that the Japanese would surrender. On August 9, the U.S. dropped a second atomic bomb over the city of Nagasaki, one of southern Japan's largest sea ports. The target had actually been the nearby city of Kokura, but due to cloud cover over that city, the pilots decided to drop the bomb over Nagasaki instead. [See Text of U.S. Leaflet Dropped over Japan Warning of a Second Atomic Bombing (primary document)]

The same day, the Soviets invaded Manchuria, entering the war against the Japanese. Japan and the Soviet Union in 1941 had signed a neutrality pact, but at a meeting near Yalta, Ukraine, in February 1945, the Soviets had agreed to join the war against Japan within three months following the end of the war in Europe.

Japan offered its surrender following the Nagasaki bombing, and the official surrender was announced August 14. While the fate of the emperor had been an obstacle to peace leading up to Japan's surrender, in the end it was agreed that Hirohito would remain on the throne as long as he was subject to the authority of the commander of the Allied occupying force, U.S. General Douglas MacArthur. [See Emperor Hirohito's Radio Broadcast Announcing Japan's Surrender (primary document)]

Although Japan surrendered soon after the Nagasaki bombing, debate still exists over whether it was the bombings or other factors, such as the Soviet entrance into the war, that brought about Japan's surrender. The debate is intensified when moral considerations about the use of atomic weapons enter into it.

The Case for the Atomic Bombing

Supporters portray the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings as a necessary means of ending the war with the fewest American lives lost. By shocking and demoralizing the Japanese troops and government through use of the bomb, they reason, the U.S. brought about a quicker surrender than would have occurred through conventional warfare. "Having found the bomb, we have used it. We have used it to shorten the agony of young Americans," Truman stated after the Hiroshima bombing. Indeed, upon hearing about Hiroshima, 2nd Lt. Paul Fussell, a 21-year-old who had been serving in France at the time and was anticipating being sent to Japan for final invasion, remarked, "We were going to live. We were going to grow up to adulthood after all." Fussell later became a well-known author.
A scene of the devastation immediately after the U.S. dropped its first atomic bomb, on Hiroshima.

Supporters at the time estimated that ending the war through the use of the atomic bomb would save thousands--perhaps even hundreds of thousands--of American lives by eliminating the need for a large-scale invasion of the Japanese homeland. Truman's military planners estimated that as many as 50,000 U.S. troops would be killed and more than 100,000 wounded in the first 30 days of such an invasion, with the total number of American deaths possibly surpassing 100,000. Truman later put that estimate at half a million troops, while Churchill said the lives of one million troops had been saved.

But it was not just the lives of U.S. soldiers that were spared, proponents note. They contend that the Japanese civilian death toll would also have been higher if Truman had instead decided to continue with the conventional bombing of Japanese cities and/or a naval blockade, which was causing starvation. They say that it also brought quicker liberation to people being held by Japan in concentration camps, including hundreds of thousands of Westerners.

Saving lives was not the only reason the U.S. needed to bring the war to a quick conclusion, some supporters say. They contend that it was important to end the war to prevent the Soviets from expanding their influence in the region. The Soviet Union was developing a growing sphere of influence, and some worried that, through entering the war against Japan and having a say in the partitioning of the defeated territories, the Soviets could gain a large foothold in the region. "I was not willing to hand over to the Russians the fruits of a long and bitter and courageous fight, a fight in which they had not participated," Truman wrote in his diary. Using the atomic bomb ended that threat, and also served as a show of U.S. strength to the Soviet Union, supporters assert.
Nagasaki also was devastated after the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb. The ruins of the Roman Catholic cathedral of Nagasaki can be seen in the background.

Supporters also dispute assertions that Japan was close to surrendering. In fact, they say, the indications were that Japan was preparing to fight to the end. They refer to fierce Japanese resistance at Okinawa just weeks before the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. They also point to statements by Japanese militarists in power that Japan would fight to the last man. For instance, Kantaro Suzuki, who was appointed premier in 1945, stated that his government intended to "fight to the very end...even if it meant the deaths of one hundred million Japanese."

Furthermore, proponents assert, despite being on the verge of defeat, Japan refused to accept unconditional surrender because that would entail the removal of the emperor from his throne, overturning centuries of tradition. At Potsdam, the Allies had made clear that they would accept no less than unconditional surrender, proponents note.

Supporters point to intercepted and decoded diplomatic and military communiques to show that Japan would not have accepted unconditional surrender. They say that in one such communique, Japan's ambassador to the Soviet Union, Naotake Sato, wrote to Soviet foreign affairs commissar Vyacheslav M. Molotov, "The Pacific War is a matter of life and death for Japan, and as a result of America's attitude, we have no choice but to continue the fight....It has now become clearly impossible for Japan to submit. Japan is fighting for her very existence and must continue to fight."

Some critics of the bombing also point to the communiques to support their arguments, claiming that they show evidence of peace overtures. But despite some communiques showing such overtures by civilian leaders, supporters note, any peace agreement had to be approved by the Japanese cabinet, which was filled
with militarists who categorically rejected unconditional surrender. Richard Frank, a World War II historian, notes that while the messages showed Japanese officials making peace overtures, "not a single one of these men...possessed actual authority to act for the Japanese government."

Supporters of the use of the atomic bombs also note that the decoded military communiques showed an increased buildup on Kyushu, the site of the allied invasion planned for November. The buildup proves that despite being on the verge of defeat, Japan would continue to put up fierce resistance, which would have resulted in the loss of many American lives, they argue. The prospect of heavy resistance at Kyushu also made the invasion option untenable, proponents of the atomic bombing say.

Some people, including some Japanese, have suggested that the bombings helped bring about the end of the war by giving the Japanese a way to surrender unconditionally without losing face. The Japanese government could tell the people that Japan simply could not defeat an enemy with nuclear weapons, they note. Hisatsune Sakomizu, Japan's chief cabinet secretary in 1945, called the bombing "a golden opportunity given by heaven for Japan to end the war."

Others point out that, compared with other damage done during the war, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings were not so devastating. They note that 600,000 Germans and 200,000 Japanese had been killed in Allied air raids prior to Hiroshima.

Furthermore, some proponents contend, the U.S. did not target "civilians" with the bombs, as critics claim. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were military targets, they assert, because of bases and military factories located there. They also note that Japan fought a "total war," in which everyone in Japan was involved in the war effort, whether fighting or working in factories and military facilities. "It seems logical to me that he who supports total war in principle cannot complain of war against civilians," wrote Father John Siemes, a philosophy professor at Tokyo Catholic University, in his personal account of the Hiroshima bombing. [See Minutes of the Second Meeting of the Atomic Bomb Target Committee (primary document)]

Overall, supporters say, deadly though it was, bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the best possible option. Theodore Van Kirk, navigator on the Enola Gay during the Hiroshima mission, addressed the question of how he felt about his role in the bombing in a 2005 interview with the German magazine Der Spiegel. "I'm not proud of all the deaths it caused, and nobody is," he said. "But how do you win a war without killing people?"

**The Case Against the Atomic Bombing**

Critics of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings say that it is barbaric and a crime against humanity to target civilians with such a devastating weapon. They note that 95% of the people who were killed in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings were civilians. According to Japanese estimates in the wake of the bombing, some 75% of those immediately killed died as a result of burns, either from "flash burns" caused by the heat of the blast or from burns from fires sparked by the blast. Many more died later from effects of the radiation, including radiation sickness (also called acute radiation syndrome) and cancer. [See Witnesses' Accounts of the Hiroshima Bombing (primary document)]
A man in Hiroshima (left) shows the photographer the flash burns he received from the dropping of the atomic bomb. Hiroshima, in another view (right), is virtually destroyed, with the exception of an odd building or two.

"My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages," Admiral William Leahy, Truman's chief of staff, said. "I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children." Some argued that the U.S. could have achieved the same result by dropping the bomb on less-populated areas, demonstrating its power without the loss of life.

Critics also accuse the U.S. of having a double standard—its government, they say, would have condemned as immoral the use of an atomic bomb by any adversary. "If the Germans had dropped atomic bombs on cities instead of us, we would have defined the dropping of atomic bombs on cities as a war crime, and we would have sentenced the Germans who were guilty of this crime to death at Nuremberg and hanged them," said Leo Szilard, a scientist who played a major role in the creation of the atomic bomb but who was a vocal critic of using atomic bombs against Japan.

Many critics also say that the bombings were not necessary. They point out that by 1945, Japan was already militarily devastated, and was putting up token resistance by midyear. "In April we knew they were beginning to try to surrender. They were already defeated in every sense. We were bombing their cities without any opposition. The Japanese were making airplane gasoline out of acorns. So we knew that they were on their last legs," says historian Gar Alperovitz. General Dwight Eisenhower, who succeeded Truman as president, held a similar view. "The Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing," he said in a 1963 interview with Newsweek.

Opponents also point to a 1946 report by the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, requested by Truman to study the damage done by U.S. air attacks. The report stated that Japan had made the decision to end the war much earlier in the year. The survey concluded:
It cannot be said...that the atomic bomb convinced the leaders who effected the peace of the necessity to surrender. The decision to seek ways and means to terminate the war, influenced in part by the knowledge of the low state of popular morale, had been taken in May 1945 by the Supreme War Guidance Council.

Like supporters of the bombings, critics point to decoded communiques to bolster their arguments. They say the decoded messages showed that as early as April and May 1945, Japan was in the process of going through a neutral mediator to make peace overtures, and argue that the U.S. should have given those efforts a chance to succeed. They also point out that in the months leading up to the bombings, Japan was trying to get the Soviet Union—which, before entering the war against Japan, had maintained a neutral stance with that country—to participate in peace negotiations. Even the Emperor supported peace at any price, critics of the bombing contend. "We have heard enough of this determination of yours to fight to the last soldiers. We wish that you, leaders of Japan, will strive now to study the ways and the means to conclude the war," Hirohito said at a June 22 meeting of the Supreme War Council.

### WWII Casualties in the War Against Japan

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One the main considerations in the decision by U.S. President Harry Truman (D, 1945-53) to use the atomic bomb against Japan to end World War II (1939-45) was the desire to spare the lives of U.S. soldiers. The U.S. had fought in several costly battles in the year leading up to the bombing of Hiroshima. Those battles were even more costly for the Japanese, who suffered as many as five casualties for every U.S. casualty.


Jeremy Eagle

And even if Japan were not on the verge of surrendering, critics say, there were other means to bring an end to the war. Some argued for the planned mass invasion of the Japanese home islands to proceed. Others argued in favor of continuing the naval blockade, "Operation Starvation," and disrupting supply lines. "The effective naval blockade would, in the course of time, have starved the Japanese into submission through lack of oil, rice, medicines and other essential materials," said Admiral. Ernest King, U.S. chief of naval operations.

Some critics argued for continued conventional air raids. They said that the air raids, more than any other military tactic, had devastated Japan. Mark Weber, director of the Institute for Historical Review, points out that on March 9-10, 1945, 300 B-29s bombed Tokyo, killing 100,000 people and burning 16 square miles of the city; further raids by U.S. B-29s later in May obliterated 56 square miles of Tokyo (one half the total area of the city). Former Japanese Premier Fumimaro Konoye noted, "Fundamentally, the thing that brought about the determination to make peace was the prolonged bombing by the B-29s."
Others say that it was the entry of the Soviet Union, which had the largest army in the world, into the war against Japan—not the atomic bombings—that finally convinced Japan that they could not win. "Japanese die-hards...had acknowledged since 1941 that Japan could not fight Russia as well as the United States and Britain," historian Ernest May wrote in a 1995 article in Pacific Historical Review.

Yet other critics say that Japan would have readily surrendered if the allies had only agreed that the emperor would remain on the throne, which is what was agreed to in the end anyway, they note. Former U.S. President Herbert Hoover (1929-33) suggested to Truman, "I am convinced that if you, as president, will make a shortwave broadcast to the people of Japan—tell them they can have their emperor if they surrender, that it will not mean unconditional surrender except for the militarists—you'll get a peace in Japan—you'll have both wars over."

Other critics were concerned with the ramifications of using an atomic bomb in battle. Szilard warned that dropping the bomb would spark an arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Szilard said he was concerned "that by demonstrating the bomb and using it in the war against Japan, we might start an atomic arms race between America and Russia which might end with the destruction of both countries."

Finally, some accuse the U.S. of ulterior motives in dropping the bomb. Some cite revenge for the Pearl Harbor attack, while others claim racism against the Japanese. Yet others say it was done for political reasons; either to justify the $2 billion ($20 billion in 1990 dollars) spent on the project to develop the bomb, or as the only way to obtain Japan's unconditional surrender, because the political cost of accepting anything less was too high.

**Hiroshima Bombing Ushers in The Nuclear Age**

Sixty years after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the debate over whether the bombings were necessary remains unresolved. But there is little dispute over the wider impact of the use of the atomic bomb: With the bombing of Hiroshima, the U.S. ushered in the nuclear age.

However, while the use of the bomb helped spark a nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, analysts point out that Hiroshima and Nagasaki also served as a lesson about the devastation nuclear weapons can cause, serving as a deterrent to the use of such weapons. *Newsweek* magazine points out that since the Nagasaki bombing, roughly 525 above-ground nuclear explosions have taken place, and not one was an act of war. "One president after another and one leader of the Soviet Union after another looked at the destructive force of these weapons [after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings] and made a private decision that there is no context in which they could ever be used," Atomic weapons historian Richard Rhodes writes.

But some warn that the lessons will eventually be forgotten, increasing the nuclear risk as states begin to reverse decades-long efforts toward nuclear disarmament. "I worry that the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is beginning to fade," says Mohamed ElBaradei, the director of the International Atomic Energy Agency. "I worry also about the nuclear arsenal of democratic states, because as long as these weapons exist there is no absolute guarantee against the catastrophic consequences of theft, sabotage or an accident."

However, only time will tell whether the lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will linger or be forgotten in an increasingly nuclear world.

**Discussion Questions & Activities**
1. Which consideration do you think should have been more important to President Harry Truman in deciding how to end the war against Japan: the loss of U.S. troops had the war continued, or the harm to Japanese civilians in using the atomic bomb?
2. Do you think Japan would have soon surrendered if the U.S. had not used the atomic bomb? Why or why not?
3. After reading both the minutes of the second Target Committee meeting and Truman's July 25 diary entry, how do you think the selection of targets meshes with Truman's diary entry?
4. Imagine you are Emperor Hirohito announcing Japan's surrender to the nation: Write your own surrender speech.
5. Read survivors' accounts of the Hiroshima bombings: Do those accounts make any difference in whether you oppose or support the use of the bomb? Explain.

Suggested Web Sites

Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II: A Collection of Primary Sources

After the Day of Infamy: "Man-on-the-Street" Interviews Following the Attack on Pearl Harbor

The Manhattan Project: An Interactive History

Bibliography


"Living Under the Cloud." Time, August 1, 2005, 36.


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