

ATOMIC BOMBS

(Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-134192.)

The US decision to drop atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki altered the course of the Asia-Pacific war and human history. It also sparked sharp controversy that continues to this day.

The controversy largely centers around three questions: Why did the United States employ these weapons? What were the available alternatives to end the war and their consequences? And were atomic bombs necessary to bring about Japan's surrender? The disputes over these questions provide students like you with an opportunity to engage in the process of historical inquiry at the deepest level.

BUILDING THE BOMB

Before exploring the questions above, it is important to understand the origins of the atomic bomb. In 1938, a German physicist discovered that splitting an atom through the process of fission could release tremendous amounts of energy. News of this discovery prompted work around the world on harnessing fission for weaponry purposes. In 1939, Albert Einstein warned President Franklin Delano Roosevelt that Nazi Germany was potentially working on an atomic bomb. Roosevelt commissioned an American effort that became the Manhattan Project. This top-secret, \$2 billion program involved more than 100,000 workers, 37 sites, and more than a dozen university laboratories. Most of the workers were never informed they were working on an atomic weapon.

USING THE BOMB

On July 16, 1945, Manhattan Project officials successfully detonated the world's first nuclear device at a test site in New Mexico code-named **Trinity**. Despite this success, officials maintained doubts about whether all the weapons would actually work in combat. The test occurred at a critical juncture in the war. Though





Germany had surrendered in May, Pacific fighting had soared to new levels of ferocity. The recently concluded battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa had resulted in roughly 122,000 Japanese casualties (about 110,000 deaths) and 70,000 American casualties (about 20,000 deaths). As many as 150,000 Okinawan civilians also perished.

The United States was also preparing for an invasion of the Japanese home islands of Kyushu on November 1, 1945, and then the Tokyo plain on Honshu about March 1, 1946. A US firebombing campaign had destroyed more than 60 Japanese cities, and a US naval blockade aimed to bring on a deadly mass famine. In addition to the six million men formally in Japan's armed forces, Japanese leaders also had declared most adult males and females (roughly 18 million people) to be combatants.

The Trinity test also coincided with the **Potsdam Conference** in Germany, where Allied leaders met to end the war with Japan and establish an enduring peace. Additionally, Roosevelt's death in April 1945 had shifted all future decisions to his untested—and uninformed—successor, Harry S. Truman. Truman pledged to carry

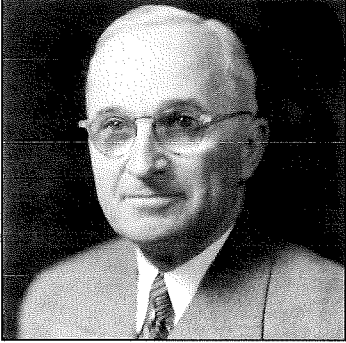


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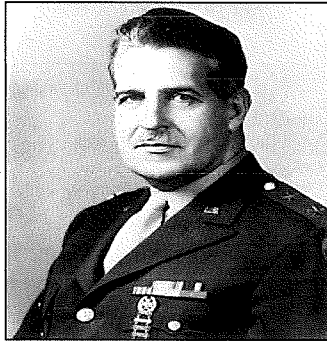
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-  [Harry S. Truman's Atomic Bomb Address, August 9, 1945](#)

The Atomic Bomb...

Key Players in the Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

<p>Harry Truman: President of the United States</p>	<p>President Truman said that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were chosen due to the fact that they were strategic military targets that would have fewer civilian losses. He was willing to use the bomb if necessary to protect American troops from a massive ground invasion of Japan</p> <p>"Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans"</p>
 <p>Courtesy of the Truman Library*</p>	<p>George Marshall: U.S. Army Chief of Staff</p> <p>The decision to drop the atomic bomb should be made by the President of the United States. "The question of whether we should drop this new bomb on Japan, in his judgment, involved such imponderable considerations as to remove it from the field of a military decision." Use of the bomb may lead to Japan finally agreeing to an unconditional surrender.</p>
 <p>Courtesy of the Truman Library*</p>	<p>Admiral William Leahy: Chief of Staff to President Truman</p> <p>Leahy was of the belief that it was not necessary to use the atomic bomb against Japan, as they had been devastated already and would not be able to continue fighting much longer.</p> <p>"It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons."</p>
 <p>Courtesy of the Truman Library *</p>	

General Leslie Groves: Commanding General of the Manhattan Project



Courtesy of the U.S. Army*

As commanding General responsible for the Manhattan Project, General Groves was of the belief that use of the bomb was a necessity to force Japan to an unconditional surrender. He also had a vested interest to see the bomb used after the significant investment that had been made in the program.

"deliver its first special bomb as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945" – Orders from General Groves

Dr. Robert Oppenheimer: Director of Research for the Manhattan Project



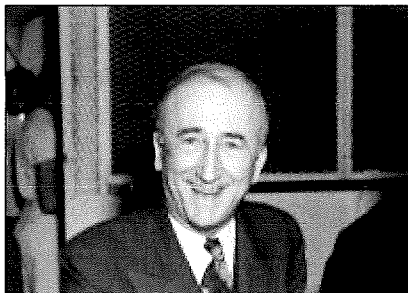
Courtesy of the Department of Energy*

In his role as Director of Research for the Manhattan Project, Dr. Oppenheimer was a strong supporter of the atomic bomb program, saying that "When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success. That is the way it was with the atomic bomb."

Looking back years after the bombings, Oppenheimer expressed regret for the way that the bomb was used, without providing warning to Japan first

"I have no remorse about the making of the bomb... That was done right. As for how we used it, I understand why it happened and appreciate with what nobility those men with whom I'd worked made their decision. But I do not have the feeling that it was done right.. ...our government should have acted with more foresight and clarity in telling the world and Japan what the bomb meant."

James Byrnes: U.S. Secretary of State



Courtesy of the Truman Library*

Byrnes was a supporter of using the atomic bomb against Japan. In Byrnes' opinion, the bomb should be dropped without warning to maximize its effectiveness. Use of the atomic bomb would also act as a deterrent to Russia and keep them from becoming involved in Japanese affairs after the war.

"We wanted to get through with the Japanese phase of the war before the Russians came in."

**Leo Szilard: Physicist on the
Manhattan Project**



Courtesy of the Department of Energy*

Szilard believed that the main purpose behind developing the bomb was to ensure that the United States had atomic capabilities before Germany. With Germany out of the war, there was no longer a need for the bomb.

"In the spring of '45 it was clear that the war against Germany would soon end, and so I began to ask myself, 'What is the purpose of continuing the development of the bomb, and how would the bomb be used if the war with Japan has not ended by the time we have the first bombs?'".