

LESSON 20 Was the United States Justified in Dropping the Atomic Bombs on Japan?

Background Information

For the United States, World War II began with a sneak attack by Japanese planes on American naval forces at Pearl Harbor. The war was fought in Europe against the Germans and their allies, and in the Pacific against the Japanese. During the war the secret Manhattan Project was commissioned to develop an atomic bomb for the United States. Germany surrendered (May 1945) before the bombs were completed,

but on August 6, 1945, a single atomic bomb destroyed Hiroshima, and on the ninth, another atomic bomb destroyed Nagasaki.

In this lesson two viewpoints are presented on the controversial use of the atomic bombs. Read and evaluate them according to the criteria your teacher tells you. Consider the relevant information which follows the two viewpoints.

Historian A

(1) Some historians argue that dropping the atomic bombs on Japan was justified because it shortened the war, thus saving lives in the end. This view is wrong. The United States was not justified in dropping the bombs.

(2) In the summer of 1945, the Japanese were almost totally defeated. American ships and planes pounded the island without any response by the Japanese. Leaders in Japan were trying to surrender and American leaders knew it. Several times the Japanese went to the Russians to ask them to mediate a peace settlement with the United States.¹ (It is not unusual for a country that wants to surrender to ask another country to speak for it at first and help negotiate a settlement.) There was only one condition that the Japanese insisted on—they wanted to keep their Emperor, the symbol of Japanese culture. The United States never even talked with the Japanese about surrender terms—American leaders kept demanding unconditional surrender. After we used the bombs and the Japanese surrendered, we let them keep their Emperor anyway. We

could have allowed the Japanese to surrender earlier and saved all those lives obliterated by the bombs by letting them have their one condition in the first place.

(3) If the bombs were not used to bring about surrender, then why were they used? The plain truth is that they were used to scare Russia. In 1945 the United States disagreed with the Soviet Union in regard to Russia's actions in Europe. Our leaders felt that by showing the Russians we had a powerful weapon, we could get them to agree to our terms in Europe and Asia. As Secretary of War Stimson said in his diary, in diplomacy the bomb would be a "master card."²

(4) President Truman had an important meeting scheduled with the Russian leader, Josef Stalin, at Potsdam, Germany in July 1945. He wanted to have the bomb completed and successfully tested when he went into that meeting. Atomic scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer said, "We were under incredible pressure to get it [the bomb] done before the Potsdam

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meeting.”³ Truman hoped to have the bomb sticking out of his hip pocket, so to speak, when he negotiated with Stalin. Then he could make new demands of the Russians regarding eastern Europe. He told some of his friends at Potsdam before the final test, “If it explodes as I think it will, I’ll certainly have a hammer on those boys.”⁴

(5) While Truman was negotiating in Potsdam, the bomb was successfully tested in New Mexico, and he became more demanding with Stalin. Secretary of War Stimson stated, “He [Truman] said it [the bomb] gave him an entirely new feeling of confidence....”⁵

(6) But the Russians had to see the power of the bomb before the United States could intimidate them with it. This was accomplished at Hiroshima. Truman remarked, “This is the greatest thing in history!”⁶

(7) A second motive for dropping the bomb was to end the war in Asia before the Russians could get involved. The Japanese were talking of surrender, but the United States wanted surrender within days, not a negotiated surrender taking weeks to complete. The Russians had agreed at Yalta to enter the war against Japan three months after the end of the war in Europe. This would be three months after May 9, or somewhere around August 9. If the Russians got involved in the war in Asia, they could spread Communism to China and other countries and possibly to Japan itself. American leaders did

not want to see this happen.⁷

(8) If the United States could speed up the Japanese surrender, we could avoid all these problems. We dropped the first bomb on August 6; Russia entered the war on the eighth, and we dropped the second bomb on the ninth. Don’t these dates look suspicious? No country could surrender in only three days—it takes longer than that to make such an important decision. We would not wait longer because we wanted Japan to surrender before the Russians could get involved.

(9) Some scientists who worked on the bomb recommended that it not be dropped on people. They proposed that the United States demonstrate the bomb’s power to Japanese leaders by dropping it on an uninhabited island. American political leaders rejected this idea. The devastating effect of the bomb had to be shown by destroying a city.

(10) Even top military leaders opposed the use of the atomic bomb.⁸ The bomb would have little effect on the war, they argued, since the Japanese were already trying to surrender.

(11) All of this evidence shows that the atomic bombs were not used to end the war and save lives, but rather to scare the Russians and speed up the end of the war before Russian influence spread further into Asia. The killing of over 100,000 civilians in one country in order to scare the leaders of another country was wrong. The United States was not justified in dropping the atomic bombs.

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Endnotes for Historian A (All are quotes from the sources cited except bracketed portions.)

¹ Gar Alperovitz (a historian), *Atomic Diplomacy* (1965). (Direct quotations from *Foreign Relations Papers of the United States: Conference at Berlin*, Vol. II, pp. 1249, 1250, 1260, 1261.)

“On July 17, the day of the first plenary session, another intercepted Japanese message showed that although the government felt that the unconditional surrender formula involved too great a dishonor, it was convinced that the demands of the times’ made Soviet mediation to terminate the war absolutely essential. Further cables indicated that the one condition the Japanese asked was preservation of ‘our form of government.’ A message of July 25 revealed instructions to the [Japanese] Ambassador in Moscow to go anywhere to meet with [Soviet Foreign Minister] Molotov during the recess of the Potsdam meeting so as to ‘impress them with the sincerity of our desire’ to terminate the war. He was told to make it clear that ‘we should like to communicate to the other party [the United States] through appropriate channels that we have no objection to a peace based on the Atlantic Charter.’ The only ‘difficult point is the...formality of unconditional surrender.’”

James F. Byrnes (Secretary of State), *All in One Lifetime*, p. 297:

“July 28: Secretary Forrestal arrived and told me in detail of the intercepted messages from the Japanese government to Ambassador Sato in Moscow, indicating Japan’s willingness to surrender.”

² Stimson (Secretary of War) Diary, May 15:

“The trouble is that the President has now promised apparently to meet Stalin and Churchill on the first of July [at Potsdam] and at that time these questions will become burning and it may become necessary to have it out with Russia on her relations to Manchuria and Port Arthur and various other parts of North China, and also the relations of China to us. Over any such tangled web of problems the S-1 secret [the atomic bomb] would be dominant and yet we will not know until after...that meeting, whether this is a weapon in our hands or not. We think it will be shortly afterwards, but it seems a terrible thing to gamble with such big stakes in diplomacy without having your master card in your hand.”

Leo Szilard (an atomic scientist who opposed use of the bombs on Japan), Conversation with Secretary of State Byrnes. Recorded on August 24, 1944, in Stewart to Bush, Atomic Energy Commission Document 200. Manhattan Engineering District—Top Secret, National Archives, Record Group 77, Box 7, folder 12; Box 14, folder 4:

[Szilard argued that we should not use the bomb.]

“Byrnes - Our possessing and demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable in Europe.”

“Szilard - [The] interests of peace might best be served and an arms race avoided by not using the bomb against Japan, keeping it secret, and letting the Russians think that our work on it had not succeeded.”

“Byrnes - How would you get Congress to appropriate money for atomic energy research if you do not show results for the money which has been spent already?”

³ Atomic Energy Commission, Oppenheimer Hearings, p. 31.

⁴ Jonathan Daniels (biographer), *The Man of Independence* (1950), p. 266.

⁵ *Foreign Relations Papers of the United States: Conference at Berlin*, 1945, Vol. II, p. 1361. Stimson Diary, July 22:

“Churchill read Grove’s report [on the successful testing of the atomic bomb in New Mexico] in full....He said, ‘Now I know what happened to Truman yesterday. I couldn’t understand it. When he got to the meeting after having read this report he was a changed man. He told the Russians just where they got on and off and generally bossed the whole meeting.’” [continued on next page]

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condition in the first place.

⁶ Harry S. Truman, *Year of Decisions*, p. 421.

⁷ Byrnes, *All in One Lifetime*, p. 300:

“Though there was an understanding that the Soviets would enter the war three months after Germany surrendered, the President and I hoped that Japan would surrender before then.”

Secretary of War Stimson stated in his diary on August 10, 1945, that he urged the President that:

“The thing to do was to get this surrender through as quickly as we can before Russia should get down in reach of the Japanese homeland....It was of great importance to get the homeland into our hands before the Russians could put in any substantial claim to occupy and help rule it.”

⁸ General Dwight Eisenhower, statement in “Ike on Ike,” *Newsweek*, November 11, 1963, p. 107:

“I voiced to him [Secretary of War Stimson] my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary and secondly, because I thought our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer necessary as a measure to save American lives. It was my belief that Japan was, at the very moment, seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of ‘face.’...It wasn’t necessary to hit them with that awful thing.”

Admiral W.D. Leahy, *I Was There* (1950), p. 441:

“It was 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.”

Air Force Chief of Staff LeMay, *New York Herald Tribune*, September 21, 1945:

“The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war.”

Historian B

(1) Dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki helped the United States avoid a costly invasion of Japan. It therefore saved lives in the long run, which makes it a justifiable action.

(2) It is true that the United States received some indication in the summer of 1945 that Japan was trying to surrender. Japan would not surrender unconditionally, however, and that was very important to the United States. The Germans had not surrendered unconditionally at the end of World War I and, as a result, they rose again to bring on World War II. The United States was not going to let that mistake happen again. As President Roosevelt said, “This time there will be no doubt about who defeated whom.”¹

(3) Although the Japanese military

situation in July 1945 was approaching total defeat, many Japanese leaders hoped for one last ditch victory in order to get softer peace terms.² One of their hopes was to divide the Grand Alliance by getting Russia (which was not at the time at war with Japan) to be the intermediary for peace negotiations. Maybe the Allies would begin to disagree, the Japanese militarists reasoned, and Japan would get off easy. Their other hope was that they could inflict enough casualties on the American troops, or hold out long enough, to get the American public to pressure their leaders to accept something less than, surrender.³

(4) Some historians argue that the only issue which prevented the Japanese from accepting unconditional surrender

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was their fear that the Emperor would be removed by the Americans. American leaders, however, believed that allowing this one condition would encourage the militarists in Japan to further resistance. Americans also felt that it would weaken the war effort in the United States since we would be deviating from our well-publicized policy of unconditional surrender.⁴

(5) Some Japanese leaders wanted much more, however, than just the one condition of keeping their Emperor. They wanted their troops to surrender to them, and they wanted no occupation of Japan or war crimes trials for Japanese leaders. Even on August 9, after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and after the Russian declaration of war against them, the Japanese leaders still could not agree to surrender.⁵ This shows that the bombs were necessary—anything less than the bombs or invasion would not have brought about unconditional surrender.

(6) Some people believe that the dates of dropping the bombs (August 6 and 9) show that the United States dropped them to stop Russian entry into the war (August 8). There are two problems with this line of reasoning. First, the United States did not know the exact date of Russian entry. Second, the bombs were to be dropped when a military officer decided that the weather was right.⁶ If Truman wanted to beat the Russians, why didn't he order the bombs to be dropped sooner, or why didn't he give in on unconditional surrender?

(7) The argument that the United States dropped the bombs in order to threaten the Russians is also weak. The fact that we were so unsuccessful in getting the Russians to agree to our policies in Europe shows that the

bomb was not used for that reason. It must have been used to shorten the war. It certainly did not scare the Russians.

(8) Some American scientists opposed using the bomb on civilian or military targets, preferring to demonstrate it on an uninhabited island. This recommendation was studied carefully by a committee (the Interim Committee) set up to consider how to use the bomb. The committee said that a demonstration could have had a lot of problems, which would have wasted one of the bombs and precious time. In light of the fact that it took two bombs dropped on cities to bring about a surrender, the demonstration idea does not seem like it would have been effective. The committee recommended the bombs be used against military targets.⁷

(9) It is important to remember that on July 26, 1945, the United States warned the Japanese that we would use the atomic bomb against them unless they accepted unconditional surrender.⁸ The fanatical Japanese leaders would not give in. They said they would ignore the warning.⁹ Thus, the loss of life from the atomic bombings was the responsibility of the Japanese leaders, not the Americans.

(10) The United States was right in insisting on unconditional surrender. Since the Japanese would not surrender unconditionally, and since a demonstration bombing would not have been effective, the only alternative to using the atomic bombs was continuing the war. This would have cost hundreds of thousands more lives. In the long run, the use of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki shortened the war and saved lives.

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Endnotes for Historian B (All are quotes from the sources cited except bracketed portions.)

- ¹ President Roosevelt at a press conference, *F.D.R.: Public Papers of the Presidents*, Vol. XIII, p. 210:
“Practically all Germans deny the fact they surrendered in the last war, but this time they are going to know it. And so are the Japs.”
- ² *Command Decisions* (a history of World War II), p. 504, quotes a study done by Brigadier General George A. Lincoln, 4 June 1945:
“In allied intelligence Japan was portrayed as a defeated nation whose military leaders were blind to defeat....Japan was still far from surrender. She had ample reserves of weapons and ammunition and an army of 5,000,000 troops, 2,000,000 of them in the home islands....In the opinion of the intelligence experts, neither blockade nor bombing alone would produce unconditional surrender before the date set for invasion [November 1945]. And the invasion itself, they believed, would be costly and possibly prolonged.”
- ³ *Command Decisions*, p. 517:
“The militarists [in the Japanese Government] could and did minimize the effects of the bomb, but they could not evade the obvious consequences of Soviet intervention, which ended all hope of dividing their enemies and securing softer peace terms.”
- ⁴ *Command Decisions*, pp. 512-13, summarizing former Secretary of State Cordell Hull, *Memoirs*, Vol. II, p. 1593:
“[Cordell] Hull’s view...was the proposal [by Secretary of War Stimson to let the Japanese keep the Emperor] smacked of appeasement....The proposal to retain the imperial system might well encourage resistance [by the Japanese] and have ‘terrible political repercussions’ in the United States.”
- ⁵ Robert Butow (a historian), *Japan’s Decision to Surrender* (1959), pp. 161, 163, 164. (Describing the debate among the six Japanese leaders about whether to surrender, August 9, 1945.)
“While Susuki, [Prime Minister], Togo [Foreign Minister] and Yonai [Navy Minister] were committed in varying degrees to an outright acceptance [of the Potsdam Declaration demanding unconditional surrender] on the basis of the sole reservation that the Imperial house would be maintained, Anami [War Minister], Umezu [Army Chief of Staff], and Toyoda [Navy Chief of Staff], felt quite differently....What gagged these men—all true ‘Samurai’ bred in an uncompromising tradition—were the other points Yonai had mentioned. They wanted either to prevent a security occupation entirely or to exclude at least the metropolis of Tokyo....So far as war criminals were concerned, they felt it should be Japan and not the victorious enemy who must try such cases. In effect, they also wanted to accept the surrender of their own men....
“From the standpoint of making postwar rationalizations and of ‘opening up the future of the country’ it was psychologically vital for the Japanese army and navy to make it appear as if they had voluntarily disbanded their military might in order to save the nation and the world at large from the continued ravages of war. If they could do this, they could very easily later plant an appealing suggestion to the effect that the imperial forces of Great Japan had not really suffered defeat at all. For this reason, too, a security occupation and war crimes trials conducted by Allied tribunals had to be avoided at all costs....
“Togo pointedly asked whether Japan could win the war if a collapse of the type [of negotiations] occurred. To this the military heads could only reply that although they were not certain of ultimate victory, they were still capable of one more campaign—a ‘decisive’ battle in the homeland....The Council was deadlocked.”
- ⁶ Memorandum to Major General I.R. Groves from Brigadier General T.F. Farrell

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Subject: Report on Overseas Operations—Atomic Bomb:

27 September 1945

“After the Hiroshima strike we scheduled the second attack for 11 August [local time]. On learning that bad weather was predicted for that time, we reviewed the status of the assembly work for the Fat Man [the second atomic bomb], our uncompleted test program, and readiness of the planes and crews. It was determined that with an all-out effort, everything could be ready for takeoff on the early morning of 9 August [local time], provided our final test of the Fat Man proved satisfactory, which it did. The decision turned out to be fortunate in that several days of bad weather followed 9 August.”

⁷ Interim Committee report, June 1, 1945, from Harry S. Truman, *Year of Decisions*, p. 419: “Recommend unanimously:

“1. The bomb should be used against Japan as soon as possible.

“2. It should be used against a military target surrounded by other buildings.

“3. It should be used without prior warning of the nature of the weapon.”

⁸ Proclamation for Unconditional Surrender, July 26, 1945. *Foreign Relations Papers of the United States: Potsdam Papers*, Vol. II, p. 1258:

“Section 13: We call upon the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of the Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurance of their good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.”

⁹ *Foreign Relations Papers of the United States: Potsdam Papers*, Document 12518, July 28, 1945. Japanese Prime Minister Suzuki to reporters:

“I believe the Joint Proclamation [the Potsdam Proclamation—warning Japan to accept unconditional surrender] by the three countries is nothing but a rehash of the Cairo Declaration [which also called on Japan to surrender]. As for the [Japanese] Government, it does not find any important value in it, and there is no other recourse but to ignore it entirely and resolutely fight for the successful conclusion of the war.”

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Relevant Information

1. Harry S. Truman, *Year of Decisions*, p. 421:
“[When I was informed of the successful bombing of Hiroshima] I was greatly moved. I telephoned [Secretary of State] Byrnes aboard ship to give him the news and then said to the group of sailors around me, ‘This is the greatest thing in history. It’s time for us to get home.’ I could not keep back my expectation that the Pacific war might now be brought to a speedy end.”
2. Henry L. Stimson, (Secretary of War in 1945), “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” *Harper’s CLCIV*, February, 1947, p. 101. Report of the Scientific Panel, June 16, 1945:
“The opinions of our scientific colleagues on the initial use of these weapons are not unanimous: they range from the proposal of a purely technical demonstration to that of the military application best designed to induce surrender.”
3. Joseph Davies (United States Ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1945) *Diary*, July 28, 1945:
“[Secretary of State Byrnes] was having a hard time with reparations [for the Soviets] but the details as to the success of the atomic bomb, which he had just received, gave him confidence that the Soviets would agree as to these difficulties. Byrnes’ attitude that the atomic bomb assured ultimate success in negotiations disturbed me more than his description of its success amazed me. I told him that threat wouldn’t work, and might do irreparable harm.”
4. Meeting at the White House, June 18, 1945. President Truman wrote down a point made by the Joint Chiefs on invading Japan:
“In all, it had been estimated [by the Joint Chiefs] that it would require until the late fall of 1946 to bring Japan to her knees.”
5. Joseph Grew, (Acting Secretary of State, May 1945), *Turbulent Era*, Vol. II, (Boston, 1952):
“In the light of available evidence I, myself, and others felt and still feel that if such a categorical statement about the dynasty [that the Japanese would be allowed to keep it] had been issued in May 1945, the surrender elements in the [Japanese] government might well have been afforded by such a statement a valid reason and the necessary strength to come to an early clear-cut decision [for surrender before the bombs were dropped].”