ATOMIC BOMB

Why did President Harry S Truman order the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

**Viewpoint:** The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were unnecessary for victory in World War II and were used primarily as a tool to impress and contain the Russians.

**Viewpoint:** President Truman used the atomic bombs in order to bring a quick end to the war.

No question has troubled American historians so much as the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Did the bombings hasten the end of the war and spare the lives of millions of Japanese and American combatants and civilians? Or did the United States cynically use these new weapons against an already defeated Japan in order to impress the Soviet Union with American power?

Perspective matters here. Historians writing closer to 1945 tended to accept President Harry S Truman's interpretation of events, that an invasion of Japan, which had been badly wounded but was hardly defeated in August 1945, would have cost over one million American lives and many more Japanese. The atomic bomb, a new weapon developed in such secrecy that Truman, who succeeded to the office on President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death in April, knew nothing of it, had a destructive magnitude that could convince the Japanese military, committed to fighting to the last man, that continued fighting indeed would sacrifice the last man. By using the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States convinced Japan's leaders not to put their people through further agony.

Since then, however, historians saw that the United States quickly turned from fighting the Japanese to challenging the Soviet Union. Recognizing that after the surrender of Germany, the Soviets were pledged to join the war against Japan, the United States had sought to end the Pacific war quickly before Soviet forces could move into East Asia. The atomic bomb was meant both to prevent Soviet expansion into the Pacific and to demonstrate to Joseph Stalin that the United States possessed a weapon which could destroy any city in the world.

This interpretation gained more credence among scholars after the Cold War became a fixture in world politics and after the Vietnam War demonstrated that some American leaders would not tell the nation the truth. Should the Vietnam experience discredit Truman? In these two essays, scholars Margaret Mary Barrett and Margo Dowling take different approaches to the question of the atomic bomb. Barrett sees the bombing as a cynical show of power against the Soviet Union. Dowling, on the other hand, argues that reading our contemporary biases into history distorts our understanding of it. One can make judgments about the past, but one cannot simply imagine that the men and women who acted in the past did so with motives we might understand. That is, we cannot simply explain the atomic bomb by taking President Truman's word for why he made his decision. Nor can we condemn Truman as devious because we know that Lyndon B. Johnson or Richard M.
Nixon was devious. Instead, we must try to take into account the world as Truman knew it and understand his decision in light of the facts he understood.

It is still possible that, given the information available to Truman, another president would have reached a different decision. Indeed, he is still the only person ever to have approved the military use of atomic weapons. He prayed that he would forever be the only man ever to have approved their military use. Truman accepted his responsibility and accepted the fact that history would judge him for using it. As historians, and as citizens, we must hold ourselves and our leaders to this same standard, accepting both the responsibility of making history and ultimately the judgment of history.

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**Viewpoint:**

The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were unnecessary for victory in World War II and were used primarily as a tool to impress and contain the Russians.

World War II was characterized by great advances in technological warfare. The most dominant examples—two bombs dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945—were unnecessary and gratuitous displays of atomic power, rather than calculated strategy to end the war. Although these weapons brought the conflict to an end, they were not the only military option available to the Americans. Not only was the Japanese army already defeated, the United States was, at the time of the bombings, waiting for Russia to declare war on Japan. Irresponsible and unwilling to depend on the Russians, the United States dropped the bombs in order to exert their power, take credit for ending the war, and deny the Russians postwar concessions in Asia and Eastern Europe.

The bomb was not necessary to defeat Japan. By the summer of 1945 Japan had already lost the war, and the American government knew it. The U.S. Navy had established a tight blockade that cut off the delivery of any raw materials. Allied bombers conducted regular raids on Japan without meeting resistance. Allied forces had brutally damaged Tokyo. All of this activity had been accomplished without atomic power. Many historians and World War II leaders, including Winston Churchill, argued that “Japan's defeat was certain before the first bomb fell.” U.S. military leaders were well aware that Japan was nearing defeat. Moreover, many of them refused to support the atomic bomb as a needed military device. Among these was General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who repeatedly cautioned against using the atomic bomb because he knew that the Japanese were close to surrender and that it was unnecessary and excessive. Their inappropriate use angered Eisenhower, as well as many of the scientists who helped develop the bomb. The irrationality of the decision to use the bombs was reaffirmed just months after they were dropped when an official U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that “certainly prior to December 31, 1945 and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.” This statement confirmed previous admonitions that the bombs were excessively destructive and unnecessary to win the war.

But President Harry S Truman and his close advisors were obsessed with the atomic bomb because it guaranteed the United States a position as the undisputed victor of the war, independent of Soviet assistance. This was crucial because both President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his successor Truman were reluctant to accept military assistance from communist Russia. More importantly, they refused to grant the Russians postwar concessions that would have accompanied that wartime assistance. As it stood the U.S.-Soviet alliance during World War II was uneasy at best. Roosevelt, Truman, and many U.S. legislators violently feared the spread of communism. Evidence of this concern was found domestically during wartime in antiradical legislation, including the McCormack Act (1938), Hatch Act (1939), and Smith Act (1940). By the final year of the war, America's intolerance of communists—both domestic and global—had reached grand proportions.

Both Roosevelt and Truman were worried about the spread of communism, particularly in Eastern Europe and Asia, areas that they thought Soviet premier Joseph Stalin would seek to control since he helped the Allies win the war. Roosevelt had maintained a policy of wartime cooperation with Stalin; however, this relationship was frowned upon by Truman, who took office in April 1945. Truman favored a hard-line policy toward communism and the Soviet Union. This was evident in his relations with the Soviet leader in the closing months of World War II. Where Roosevelt might have granted Stalin a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe in order to maintain amicable foreign relations, Truman adamantly refused to do so. Thus, for Truman the atomic bomb provided the perfect
excuse to keep Russia and communism out of Western Europe and Asia and thereby eliminate any concessions owed to Stalin for Russian involvement.

Truman's intent to use the bomb as an alternative to negotiating with Stalin was evident as soon as the bomb was completed. Truman refused to tell Stalin about the bomb, despite the fact that the two were wartime allies. Instead, upon successful testing of the device, Truman mentioned to Stalin that he had "a weapon of unusual destructive force." Truman was purposely secretive to insure that it would be a shock to the Russians as well as the Japanese. In Truman's mind, had a Russian declaration of war against Japan forced a surrender, rather than the bomb, Stalin might demand a larger role in the Japanese peace negotiations. Truman refused to let Stalin put him in such a disadvantageous position.

Truman was attracted to the efficiency the bomb provided. It substituted for the slow and costly use of armies that had to trudge across Asia and eliminated the intricate coordination required of strategic military plans. It also replaced the complications inherent in Russian involvement in the Pacific. Although Stalin promised to declare war on Japan in early August 1945, the bomb was a much simpler and advantageous military alternative for the Americans. However, it was also powerful enough to eradicate an entire civilization and categorically beat Japan into submission. The equivalent of using a two-ton wrecking ball to defeat a rickety treehouse, the atomic bomb was more efficient than conventional weapons. Truman decided to use the most powerful weapon ever known as a display of power—specifically so that Americans could take credit for bringing the war to an explosive and unquestionable end.

Truman employed what historians have called "atomic diplomacy." That is, he used the bomb as a substitute to negotiating with Stalin. For Truman the bomb showed several things to Stalin: that the United States had defeated Japan without Soviet assistance and would, therefore, not be obligated to grant Stalin postwar concessions; that America was dominant in the atomic race; and that Truman had a destructive instrument and was not afraid to use it.

The atomic attack was a cruel and unreasonable assault on an already defeated adversary. After the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August, the Americans displayed inhuman impatience by not waiting longer to drop the second device, which was delivered on Nagasaki three days later. More than one hundred thousand Japanese perished, and thousands more were injured or poisoned with radiation.

Truman impressed the Soviets with the bomb, asserting that the United States had and would not hesitate to use atomic power. It gave Truman a sense of confidence that bordered on arrogance and bred a feeling of independence and control. They dropped the bombs precisely before the Russians had a chance to enter the war so that the United States could have complete and unequivocal control of the peace process. They ended the war independently and saved many more lives for all other nations involved and that meant the entire world was indebted to their accomplishments. The bomb put him one step ahead of Stalin. It was an impressive display of technological prowess and military strategy, both a milestone in technology and bold decision making. Other nations might follow suit and develop their own atomic weapons, but the United States had the reputation of being the first and, therefore, was the most powerful and technologically advanced nation. It was a distinction that had finally set the United States apart—and above—the Soviet Union.

-MARGARET MARY BARRETT, ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

Viewpoint:
President Truman used the atomic bombs in order to bring a quick end to the war.

From 10 August to 15 August 1945 the American public was polled: "Do you approve or disapprove of using the new atomic bomb on Japanese cities?" Only 10 percent of those polled disapproved. A moment that has since become venerated as the beginning of the end of civilization was welcomed and cheered because it did what Allied leaders, especially Harry S Truman, had hoped it would do—end a war that had consumed America for more than three years.

With the advantage of more than fifty years of hindsight it is easy to condemn the actions of Truman, but as Chief Executive of the United States it was his duty to make every effort to end World War II. Truman was committed to achieving this goal as quickly and with as few casualties as possible. There was no guarantee the atomic bomb would work; there was no guarantee Japan would surrender. The Allies planned for a massive invasion of the Japanese mainland; the Japanese continued their defensive preparations; and Truman took a chance, using the bomb for the purpose for which it had been developed—to destroy the enemy.
It has been argued that the use of atomic weapons against Japan was unnecessary because Japan was, for all intents and purposes, defeated. The Japanese may have been "defeated," but that does not mean that they were ready to surrender. In the samurai warrior culture that then defined Japan, surrender was not an option. Soldiers would fight to the death against all odds; this mentality—the Bushido code—extended to Japanese civilians as well. At the Battle of Saipan an estimated 10,000 women and children committed suicide by throwing themselves from the islands' cliffs rather than be captured by the enemy. As American bombs rained down on Tokyo and an American naval blockade slowly strangled Japanese supply lines, the people of Japan prepared for an invasion. The Japanese willingness to die before surrender was seen by military leaders as an advantage over the invaders. The welcomed invasion was referred to as the Decisive Battle and was seen as a chance for the Japanese to assert their superior resolve: the sheer numbers of Japanese, military and civilian, who were willing to die for their country would inflict so much loss of life on the Americans that the invasion would fail and the Japanese could then negotiate peace. By 6 June 1945 the Japanese had successfully predicted where the Allies would invade (the main island of Kyushu) and had mobilized all their resources.

The Japanese government distributed The People's Handbook of Resistance Combat (1945), which, along with instructions on how to make "flame bombs" (Molotov cocktails) and the correct way to impale American GI's, included inspirational passages such as the following: "Should the enemy invade our mainland, 100 million of us, as the Special Attacking Forces, must exterminate them to protect our native soil and maintain our everlasting empire." This mentality sustained the Japanese commitment to battle when all Western sources considered them defeated.

It has also been suggested that Truman's decision to unleash the United States' atomic power was more about containing the Soviets than securing peace from Japan. However, Truman and Franklin D. Roosevelt before him had counted on and continued to desire Soviet participation in the Asian war. Even if the American offensive was able to force Japan's surrender, there were still 5 million Japanese troops spread throughout the Pacific theater—there were not enough atomic weapons to bomb them all. Joseph Stalin had promised to join the war against Japan three months after Germany's defeat in May. In July 1945 Truman went to the Potsdam Conference with the purpose of obtaining a definite Soviet commitment.

At Potsdam Truman received word of the first successful test of an atomic bomb. Scholars tend to see this information as influencing Truman's further actions at the conference. It is true that he did not give Stalin much information on the new weapon aside from acknowledging its existence, but Truman did get Stalin's assurance that the Soviet Union would declare war on Japan and attack its forces in Manchuria by late August. During the conference (and after word of the successful test of the bomb) the American and British combined chiefs of staff met with their Soviet counterparts and exchanged information on future operations. Two days later on 26 July the American and Soviet chiefs of staff met again, this time to discuss precise coordination of Allied operations. The uncertain nature of the nuclear weapons made it necessary to continue planning an invasion of the Japanese mainland in which Soviet participation was a necessary element of Allied strategy. The value Truman placed on Soviet assistance is evident in a letter written to his wife, Bess, from Potsdam, dated 18 July: "I'll say that we'll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won't be killed! That's the important thing."
TOP SECRET ORDER
25 July 1945

TO: General Carl Spaatz
Commanding General
United States Army Strategic Air Forces

1. The 509 Composite Group, 20th Air Force will deliver its first special bomb as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945 on one of the targets: Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata and Nagasaki. To carry military and civilian scientific personnel from the War Department to observe and record the effects of the explosion of the bomb, additional aircraft will accompany the aircraft carrying the bomb. The observing planes will stay several miles distant from the point of impact of the bomb.

2. Additional bombs will be delivered on the above targets as soon as made ready by the project staff. Further instructions will be issued concerning targets other than those listed above.

3. Discussion of any and all information concerning the use of the weapon against Japan is reserved to the Secretary of War and the President of the United States. No communiques on the subject or releases of information will be issued by Commanders in the field without specific prior authority. Any news stories will be sent to the War Department for specific clearance.

4. The foregoing directive is issued to you by direction and with approval of the Secretary of War and of the Chief of Staff, USA. It is desired that you personally deliver one copy of this directive to General MacArthur and one copy to Admiral Nimitz for their information.

(Sgd) Thos. T. Handy

Thos. T. Handy
General, G. S. C.
Acting Chief of Staff

Source: United States National Archives, Record Group 77, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Manhattan Engineer District, TS Manhattan Project File '42 to '46, Folder 58.

The president and a former soldier, Truman wanted to save as many lives as possible and followed all avenues in pursuit of this goal.

It is important to realize that during its development atomic weaponry was seen as just that—another weapon in the vast arsenal of twentieth-century warfare. Truman, a field artillery captain in World War I, is the only modern-day president to experience ground troop action and as such is perhaps the only president who could appreciate the importance of a weapon that could potentially destroy the enemy with no risk to America's soldiers. When Truman became president after the unexpected death of Roosevelt in April 1945, he found himself facing several complex situations both domestically and abroad. By the time Truman was briefed, on his second day in office, on the developments the United States had made in creating an atomic weapon, his one clear goal was to end the war in the Pacific as quickly and with as few casualties as possible. The new atomic bomb had the potential to secure that end.

It should be noted that by the spring of 1945 there was no question among those who knew of its existence that the atomic weapon being developed would be used against the Axis. In fact, most high-level discussions focused on when and how the bomb would be used—not if it should be used. Those who suggested the atomic weapons were used against Japan because of Western racist tendencies have no real grasp of the motivations and politics of atomic developments. The overall Allied war plans formed in late 1941 called for the defeat of Germany first. The terrible devastation wreaked on Dresden, Berlin, and other German cities—with conventional bombs—attests to this Allied strategy. Had the Germans not surrendered when they did, the atomic bomb would most definitely have been used against them.

In response to the news of the United States's nuclear developments, Truman formed what was known as the Interim Committee. This advisory board consisted of military and civilian personnel who had access to the top secret information and were in a position to offer insight and opinions to the new president. On 1 June 1945, the committee submitted a report to Truman in which it unanimously recommended that as soon as possible the bomb should be used against a military industrial target in Japan with no prior warning.

Although a 23 April Joint Chiefs intelligence report assessed that it was probable "that unconditional surrender could not be forced upon the Japanese before the middle or latter part of 1946," Truman gave approval to the continuing development of Operation OLYMPIC, the code name for the proposed invasion of Japan. In mid May 1945 the planning moved to a preparation stage and Military Intelligence Services (MIS) projected that by the date set for the invasion (1 November 1945), the Japanese would have in southern Kyushu two combat divisions, two depot divi-
sions, and an independent tank regiment—all total 450,000 troops. When, in a 14 June memo from Truman’s chief of staff, Admiral William D. Leahy, the various service chiefs were asked to give an estimate for time required and losses in killed and wounded that would result from the proposed invasion, their estimates, which were based on these M15 numbers, were as follows: 46,000 killed; 170,000 wounded; 4,000 missing—a total of 220,000. (As the fighting continued in the Pacific theater, U.S. Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill both quoted invasion casualty figures of 1 million American and 500,000 British dead.) The memo also advised the chiefs that Truman intended “to make his decision on the campaign with the purpose of economizing to the maximum extent possible in the loss of American lives. Economy in the use of time and money cost is comparatively unimportant.”

By late July, however, the chief of Douglas MacArthur’s intelligence staff, Major General Charles A. Willoughby, issued a report which reflected more recent M15 and Signaling Network (SIGNET) information on the enemy forces on Kyushu: an estimated 560,000 combat soldiers and 575,000 home defense troops, a force already 250,000 stronger than predicted in May. To get an idea of the resistance such troops would offer to an actual invasion force, the American military looked to its most recent battle in the Pacific—Okinawa.

The fighting on Okinawa had started in April 1945. The invaders faced 75,000 Japanese troops and 25,000 Japanese civilian volunteers. By the time General Willoughby’s report circulated in late July, American casualties on Okinawa were estimated to be 49,000. The Japanese forces on Okinawa had no chance of being relieved and yet fought to the death, holding out for more than one hundred days against a much larger American force that had massive air support. This resistance was taken as an indication of how the Japanese would defend the mainland; the number of defenders on Kyushu at that time was six times larger than the number on Okinawa. Presumably, potential American casualties would be proportionate.

Having been informed of the successful testing of an atomic device at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on 16 July, the Potsdam Conference attendees approved of and announced the Potsdam Declaration, which gave the Japanese one last chance to surrender. The declaration, released on 24 July, clearly outlined the conditions of surrender offered by the United States, Great Britain, and China (the Soviet Union was still obligated to remain neutral because of the neutrality pact signed with Japan in 1941). Although the atomic bomb was not mentioned specifically, Japan was warned that “the full application of our military power, backed by our resolve, will mean the inevitable and complete destruction of the Japanese armed forces and just as inevitably the utter devastation of the Japanese homeland.” Two days later Japanese Prime Minister Admiral Kantaro Suzuki informed the press that his government intended to ignore the Potsdam Declaration.

All other attacks—the bloody battle for Okinawa, the constant firebombing of Tokyo—had failed to convince the Japanese of the need to surrender. Stalin’s troops would not be able to join the fight until mid August at the earliest; the invasion date was three months away, and in the meantime Allied troops and civilians were dying. Taking into consideration these factors—the advice of his military advisors, the recommendations of the Interim Committee—Truman decided to use the bomb.

Although the option of demonstrating the bomb’s powerfulness to the Japanese before dropping it on their land had been discussed, it was ruled out, and on 6 August 1945 the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Apart from the Potsdam Declaration, which the Japanese had chosen to ignore, no warning was given. Three days later the Soviet Union invaded Manchuria and a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. On 15 August Japan surrendered. By the end of 1945, deaths attributed to the two bombs numbered 210,000. How many lives were saved by Truman’s decision to use atomic weapons will always be debated. Of those who were potential casualties one thing is certain, they were glad Truman decided to drop the bomb.

Paul Fussell, who was a twenty-one-year-old infantry lieutenant, remembers: “When the atom bombs were dropped and news began to circulate that ‘Operation Olympic’ would not, after all, be necessary, when we learned to our astonishment that we would not be obliged in a few months to rush up the beaches near Tokyo assault-firing while being machine-gunned, mortared, and shelled, for all the practiced phlegm of our tough facades we broke down and cried with relief and joy. We were going to live. . . . The killing was all going to be over, and peace was actually going to be the state of things.”

The stance taken by Fussell was echoed by Truman. In his 1960 book, *Truman Speaks*, reflecting on his decision to utilize nuclear weapons, Truman reiterated the one guiding principle behind his decision—ending the war.
Using the atom bomb, he said, was “no great decision. . . . It was merely another powerful weapon in the arsenal of righteousness. . . . It was a purely military decision to end the war.”

—MARGO DOWLING, COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA

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