

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

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Historian A

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Oppenheimer said, "We were under incredible pressure to get it [the bomb] done before the Potsdam 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 pos-

sibly 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 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

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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."

^a 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 unconditional surrender.³

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

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Historian B

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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 of 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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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]."