

HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI:

Was Truman's Decision to Use the Bomb Justified?

Teacher's Guide

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INTRODUCTION

The study of the decision to drop the Atom Bomb on Hiroshima provides a vehicle for students to learn many things about modern international relations. Political, scientific, economic, and moral issues are intertwined in such a way as to provide the student with many insights about how great historical decisions are made. The purpose of this program is to introduce the student to the complexities of the Hiroshima decision and to encourage individual study that will help him or her to appreciate that:

- * * Some great decisions present genuine moral dilemmas for the decision makers. There is frequently no perfect alternative.
- * * In the modern world, science and politics are so closely connected that politicians must know something of science, and scientists sometimes behave more like politicians than scientists.
- * * Great historical decisions are in fact often made by many people, although one person may get the credit or the blame.
- * * The Hiroshima decision changed the nature of warfare so radically as to require entirely different ways of thinking about international relations.

PROGRAM RUNNING TIME: 20 minutes.

NARRATION

This city was destroyed by a single bomb dropped from a single airplane. Its name is Hiroshima. The American government says that 68,000 people were killed here. The Japanese say there were many more.

The Hiroshima bomb had an explosive force 36,000 times greater than any previous bomb.

It was an entirely different kind of bomb—an atomic bomb. Its force came from the energy released by smashing the nuclei of atoms. This phenomenon introduced a new terror into warfare—radiation.

Not only did the bomb cause damage by blast and fire, it also filled the air with deadly radioactivity. Many who were not killed by the explosion died slow, agonizing deaths from radiation sickness.

The invention of this bomb is one of the most remarkable achievements in human history. It opened a new era called the atomic age. Why did it begin like this? Will it end the same way?

The atomic bomb was the product of an incredible wartime enterprise known as the Manhattan Project. It costs over two and a half billion dollars and required the construction of the biggest industrial complex ever built by man. It employed over 590,000 people.

The Manhattan Project was created as a consequence of a letter from Albert Einstein to President Roosevelt. The letter said that recent discoveries in nuclear physics indicated that it might be possible to build a bomb of devastating power, and that the Germans were known to be working on such a bomb.

If German scientists succeeded in building the atomic bomb, Hitler might be able to use it to conquer the world.

So the President was persuaded that if the bomb could be built, the United States should be the first nation to build it.

To accomplish this, the Manhattan Project mobilized immense economic, technological, and scientific resources—all of this in the middle of an intense war effort, when the Americans didn't even know if such a bomb could be successfully produced.

Brigadier General Leslie R. Groves was put in charge of the entire project. He was faced with the staggering task of building a bomb that had never been built before, on the basis of a scientific principle that had never been proved, and out of an element that didn't even exist in nature.

According to the scientists, the bomb's power would come from the energy liberated when the nuclei of atoms were broken apart in a chain reaction. That is why it was called the atomic bomb. It could be made out of one or the other of two elements: Uranium-235 or Plutonium-239.

Since no one knew if large enough quantities of either element could be produced, it was decided that scientists should work on both possibilities, despite the expense.

A plant to produce Plutonium was built at Hanford, Washington. A Uranium plant was built at Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

To design the actual bomb, a giant laboratory was created at Los Alamos, near Santa Fe, in New Mexico. The town became a secret city. The people who worked there couldn't even tell their relatives where they were, much less what they were doing.

Top scientists were also working at constructing the first nuclear reactor under the football stadium at the University of Chicago.

This immense mobilization of resources took place under conditions of tension and anxiety. Scientists, military men, and administrators were working against time. Since time was so important, all possibilities were being explored at once.

The first nuclear chain reaction was achieved on December 2, 1942, at Chicago. This proved that the theory behind the project was correct. But there was still the problem of whether the bomb would actually work.

Not until February, 1945, two and a half years after the Manhattan Project was started, did Plutonium begin arriving at Los Alamos. A team headed by Robert Oppenheimer immediately began building a Plutonium bomb. Uranium began to be available a short time later.

On July 16, 1945, in a remote desert area near the town of Alamogordo, New Mexico, the first nuclear explosion in history occurred. It was a Plutonium bomb explosion known by the code name "Trinity." The closest observers were five miles away.

A scientist who was at Alamogordo wrote later that the whole effect was so staggering that he found it difficult to believe.

Even before the Trinity explosion, the Uranium bomb had been completed and was on its way to Hiroshima. That city would be its first test. A second Plutonium bomb would follow it shortly. Its destination: Nagasaki.

At 8:15 on the morning of August 6, 1945, the bomb fell on Hiroshima. According to American figures, 68,000 men, women, and children were instantly killed. The Japanese say 260,000. The Nagasaki bomb killed 38,000 according to the Americans. The Japanese say 74,000. Many more died later from injuries and radiation exposure.

This is Admiral William Leahy, Chief of Staff to President Roosevelt, and later advisor to President Truman. Referring to the atomic bomb five years after Hiroshima, he said:

"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."

Is this judgement too harsh? Why did we use it? We decided to build the bomb because we were afraid that the Germans might develop it first.

But the Germans surrendered before the bomb was ready to be used against them. Why then did we feel it was necessary to use it against Japan?

We shall look first at the official government explanation of the decision to drop the bomb. And then, we shall review criticisms which have been made against that decision.

Even though Truman had just become President in April, 1945, and knew very little about the development of the bomb, it was necessary for him to make a decision about its use. Truman revealed the main reason he had decided to use the bomb in a speech he made to Congress after the bombing:

"The world will not that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima...a military base... We won the race of discovery against the Germans. We had used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans. We shall continue to use it until we completely destroy Japan's power to make war."

The main argument, then, was that the atomic bomb would shorten the war and save lives, not only American lives, but Japanese lives as well. Without the use of the bomb, there was a danger that the Japanese would continue to fight, and a bloody invasion of their homeland would be necessary.

It was over three and a half years since the Japanese had started the war by attacking Pearl Harbor. During that period, they had fought fiercely and had killed thousands of Americans.

Their determination was symbolized by their use of kamikazi attacks—suicide flights by pilots who would deliberately crash their bomb-carrying planes into American ships. Would the whole Japanese nation fight in such a suicidal way when their homeland was invaded?

The American government estimated that if an invasion of Japan were necessary to end the war, the fighting would result in over a million American casualties.

(Truman)

"We are now prepared to destroy more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have in any city."

(Narrator)

According to the Truman administration, the Japanese could be persuaded to end the war only by shocking and dramatic evidence that resistance was foolish, and that the United States had the power to destroy Japan completely. The administration believed that the atom bomb would cause the necessary shock.

(Truman)

"If they do not now accept our terms, they may expect a rain of ruin from the air the like of which has never been seen on this earth."

(Narrator)

The government also felt that the bomb was no more inhumane than the massive fire bombing raids that had taken place over Hamburg and Dresden in Germany, and over Tokyo in Japan. The incendiary raid on Tokyo in March of 1945 did more damage and caused more casualties than the atom bomb in Hiroshima.

This is Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War in the Truman administration, and a key person in the decision to use the bomb. After the war he explained his position.

“My chief purpose was to end the war in victory with the least possible cost in the lives of the men in the armies which I had helped to raise... I believe that no man holding in his hands a weapon of such possibilities for accomplishing this purpose and saving those lives, could have failed to use it and afterwards looked his countrymen in the face.”

This then, was the position taken by the Truman administration in explaining its decision to use the bomb—it shortened the war and it saved lives. But his explanation was not accepted by everyone at that time, and it is not accepted by everyone today.

The critics of the Hiroshima decision say that there are important weaknesses in the government’s argument. In the first place, they say, Japan was already prepared to negotiate an end to the war, and therefore, it was not necessary to use the bomb.

The critics cite the many peace feelers put out by the Japanese government. Japanese envoys in Europe had let it be known that Japan was interested in ending the war. The United States government should have taken these efforts more seriously, the critics say. The war might have been ended without either the bomb or an invasion of Japan.

On the other hand, we learned after the war was over that the Japanese cabinet was deeply divided on the question of surrender, and that even after the bombing of Hiroshima it was necessary for the emperor to intervene in order to bring about the surrender.

The main reason that the Americans did not negotiate with the Japanese was the Allies’ famous doctrine of “unconditional surrender.”

(FDR)

“The unconditional surrender of Japan is as essential as the defeat of Germany.”

(Truman)

“Our demand has been, and it remains, unconditional surrender of Japan.”

(Narrator)

This had become a slogan, repeated over and over by Allied leaders. What did it mean? The Japanese were afraid it meant that the emperor would be tried and even executed as a war criminal. Some scholars think that if the Americans had given assurances that the emperor would be safe, the Japanese would have been willing to surrender earlier.

But even though the Americans actually did allow the emperor to retain much of his authority when the war was over, they refused to say in advance that they would do this.

The critics make another argument. Even if one grants that the bomb was necessary to persuade the Japanese that unconditional surrender, whatever it meant, was better than total annihilation, could this not have been demonstrated without dropping a bomb on a city and killing so many people?

Wasn't it possible first to drop the bomb on some uninhabited target in full view of the Japanese so that they could see its terrible devastating effect? They could have been warned that if they did not surrender within a certain time, then the bomb would be used on a city.

In fact, this approach was suggested during the war by a group of scientists who had worked on the bomb and who began to have doubts about the wisdom of using it.

Their spokesman was a Nobel Prize-winning physicist by the name of James Franck. He was a refugee from Nazi Germany and had been working on the Manhattan Project in Chicago.

Franck chaired a committee of atomic scientists which drafted a report on the bomb. It argued for international control of nuclear weapons to prevent their being used in future wars. The bomb could not be kept a secret the scientists said, and it should be controlled before it was too late.

The Under Secretary of the Navy, Ralph Bard, wrote a memorandum in June, 1945, arguing that Japan should be given some preliminary warning and some information about the power of the bomb before it was actually used.

None of these arguments for delay was accepted by President Truman. He and other key decision makers were afraid that a demonstration explosion might not work. What if the demonstration were a dud?

Also, there were only two bombs that were ready. They had taken a long time to produce, and they were terribly expensive. There was a strong feeling that they should not be wasted on a demonstration.

And if the target for the demonstration bombing were announced in advance, there was a danger that the Japanese might move American prisoners of war into the target area.

Undoubtedly it is much easier to analyze the problem now than it was during the war when Americans were dying in battle and Japan was a hated enemy. It would have been extremely difficult then to decide not to use this new weapon in the way that would hurt the enemy the most.

Critics ask, would not the risks of a demonstration have been worthwhile in order to avoid the horror of Hiroshima? The issue was not only the lives of the Japanese who died in the holocaust, it was also the precedent that was being set for warfare in the future, when such weapons might some day be turned against the United States.

Critics claim that the arguments become more forceful when one considers Nagasaki. An atomic bomb was dropped on this city only three days after the bombing of Hiroshima. This was hardly enough time for the Japanese to evaluate the damage and decide what to do.

Why wasn't more time allowed? Why kill more thousands of civilians before giving the Japanese government time to survey the damage of Hiroshima and recognize what a terrible force had been unleashed against them?

As more and more historical documents have been declassified, historians have been finding new answers to these questions. In fact, a whole new school of thought has come into existence as a consequence of this controversial and influential book by Gar Alperovitz.

The effect of the bombing according to Alperovitz, was not primarily to end the war with Japan, but to start the cold war with Russia. At the time of the Trinity explosion, three weeks before Hiroshima, President Truman was at Potsdam bargaining with the Soviet Premier, Joseph Stalin, about the peace settlement in Europe.

Stalin was determined to set up satellite governments in Eastern Europe to provide a security barrier against any future war. Truman wanted to prevent Communist domination in Eastern Europe.

Truman's Secretary of State, James Byrnes, has also explained that the administration wanted to end the war with Japan before the Russians came into it. If Russia declared war on Japan, then presumably she would have some claim to participate in the peace settlement, as she did in the case of Germany.

Of course the Alperovitz explanation of the Hiroshima decision is not accepted by everyone. It is vigorously contested by Herbert Feis, a widely respected historian, and will no doubt be debated for a long time.

Today, Hiroshima is a new city in a new world. But is it a better world? Now, one bomb, delivered by one airplane, or one missile, or even smuggled in one suitcase, can entirely destroy a city many times larger than Hiroshima.

It is a world in which defensive measures must therefore be one hundred percent effective. A defense which is less than that is no defense at all, and no one has ever devised a defensive system that is one hundred percent effective.

Thus, every city in the world is a potential Hiroshima. If there is a war among the nuclear powers, this might be New York, or Chicago, or Los Angeles.

Each year, on the anniversary of the bombing, the people of Hiroshima hold memorial services.

Visitors come from all over the world to commemorate the terrible suffering that took place here and to remind the world of the necessity of preventing nuclear warfare in the future.

They show visitors the evidence of what the bomb did to buildings...and to human beings.

These people do not argue about why the decision to drop the bomb was made. But perhaps the rest of us should.

Do you think President Truman made the right decision when he ordered the bombing of Hiroshima? Do you think a president of the United States today, or the leader of any other country, should order the use of nuclear weapons in a future war?

The future of mankind depends on the answers to questions like these.

SPECIAL PROJECTS

The bibliography lists several inexpensive paperback books which deal either with the Hiroshima decision or related issues. They may be used as the basis for a variety of written and oral reports. The following are some suggested topics:

1. Was the bombing of Hiroshima any worse from a humanitarian point of view than the fire bombing of Dresden and Hamburg?
2. Should nuclear weapons be outlawed? If so, how could such a decision be enforced?
3. In our government, who has the power today to decide whether or not to use nuclear weapons in a war? Would it be better if this power were allocated in some other way?
4. Would the Japanese have surrendered if the Atom Bomb had not been dropped? If so, when?
5. Why was the Atom Bomb not used in either the Korean War or the Vietnam war? Did anybody in authority want to use it?
6. Compare the effects of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs with the bombs that are available in the United States, the Soviet Union, and other nation-states today.
7. Compare the theories on the "Hiroshima decision" of Gar Alperovitz and Herbert Feis.
8. Was the doctrine of "unconditional surrender" a good idea, and should it be used in future wars?
9. How many of the victims of Hiroshima are alive today? What are the long term medical and biological consequences of the bombing?
10. Why was the killing of civilians by Lieutenant Calley at My Lai in Vietnam a war crime and the killing of many more civilians at Hiroshima not a war crime?

NOTES

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