

# Learning Activity 6

## *Was the United States justified in dropping the atomic bomb on Japan to end the war?*

### **BACKGROUND**

On May 7, 1945, what was left of the German government surrendered unconditionally. May 8 was officially proclaimed V-E Day—Victory in Europe Day—and was greeted with frenzied rejoicing in the Allied countries. But Japan refused to accept terms of unconditional surrender, despite the terrible destruction and massive casualties inflicted on its cities by Allied bombing.

At the Potsdam Conference in July, President Truman, new on the job, received the earthshaking news he eagerly awaited: an atomic bomb had been successfully tested in a desert near Alamogordo in New Mexico. The billion dollar Manhattan Project had achieved its aim. The president, after considering the advice of military and scientific experts, decided to use the atomic bomb to cause Japan to surrender quickly, preventing further Allied losses.

At 7 A.M. on the morning of August 6, 1945, the people of Hiroshima, Japan, a city of 250,000 people, were beginning their day in the normal way. Although many Japanese cities had been recently bombed by American planes, Hiroshima had been lucky; it had so far been spared. This was soon to change. An air raid warning sounded, soon followed by an “all clear.” Then a spotter saw three bombers heading toward the city. Since this was far fewer than would appear in a bombing raid, no new warning was issued. Suddenly, at 8:15 a.m. a blinding flash cut across the sky. A great mushroom cloud of intense heat and debris rose from the center of the city. In a matter of seconds, Hiroshima was reduced to a wasteland.

What had caused this holocaust? A United States B-29, the *Enola Gay*, had dropped one atomic bomb, ushering a new and frightening era, the atomic age. The center of Hiroshima was destroyed and seventy thousand people died as a direct result of the bomb, but Japan still did not surrender. American aviators, on August 9, dropped a second atomic bomb on the naval-base city of Nagasaki. The explosion took a

horrible toll of about eighty thousand persons. In the years that followed, several times that number of Japanese people would die of diseases resulting from radiation poisoning.

Japan could endure no more. On August 10, 1945, Tokyo sued for peace on one condition: that Emperor Hirohito be allowed to remain on his ancestral throne as nominal emperor. Despite their “unconditional surrender” policy, the Allies accepted this condition.

President Truman’s order to drop the bomb is one of the most controversial decisions ever made by an American president. The consequences of that decision continue to threaten the very survival of humankind.

### **MAJOR IDEA**

- TECHNOLOGY has increased people’s capacity to accomplish good and evil.

### **CONCEPTS**

- Choice
- Technology

### **PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES**

Students will be able to:

- Describe the status of war in the Pacific as of July 1945.
- Analyze arguments for and against using atomic weapons against Japan to end World War II.
- Take a position as to whether the use of the A-bomb was morally and/or militarily justified.

### **DEVELOPMENT**

- Distribute Worksheet 6A, “What Should Truman Do?” Divide the class into groups of four and instruct each group to read and complete the “decision chart.” Review with the class the advantages and disadvantages (long and short range) of each choice.

- Distribute Worksheet 6B, “Memo to President Truman.” Have students write a memorandum to President Truman indicating which course of action he should take and the reasons for the recommendation. Have students exchange papers. Then poll the class on which action they would have advised.
- Distribute Worksheet 6C, “Truman’s Decision.” Have students examine the photograph, read the President’s statement, and explain their answers to the following questions:
  - What do the photograph and President Truman’s statement tell us about his actual decision?
  - Why did President Truman decide to drop the atomic bomb on Japan? Was his decision based on moral considerations (right and wrong) or political and military considerations? Explain.
  - What evidence is there that Truman did consider alternatives to dropping the bomb on Japan?
  - Hiroshima was a Japanese army center. Nagasaki was a naval center. Both contained large civilian populations. In your opinion, was Truman justified in dropping atomic bombs on these two cities? Did the military situation call for this, as Truman claimed? Explain. (Tell students that historians are still debating the military necessity of dropping the bomb.)
  - If Truman had not used the atomic bomb and huge American casualties had resulted from an invasion of the Japanese islands, how do you think the American public would have reacted? How do you think mothers and fathers of the dead American soldiers would have reacted? Explain.
  - Some modern historians have claimed that Truman decided to drop the bombs on Japan to:
    - 1) prevent the Soviets from sharing in the victory in Asia. The Russians were soon scheduled to enter the war against Japan. If they fought in the war for long, they would take over parts of China and stake a claim to occupy part of Japan itself.
    - 2) demonstrate to the Soviet Union that the United States had the most powerful military force in the world.
 Would these be valid reasons for dropping the atomic bomb on Japan? Why or why not?
- Distribute Worksheet 6D, “Hiroshima Victims Speak.” Have students examine the photograph, read the statements, and then explain their answers to the following questions:
  - What can we learn from this photograph and these statements about the effects of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima?
  - What are your feelings about these statements made by victims of the bombing?
  - President Truman argued that dropping the atomic bomb on Japan was justified by the military situation. In view of the bomb’s impact on Japan, how morally justified was Truman’s decision? Should questions of morality have been considered in making the decision to use the atomic bomb? Why or why not?
  - If you had been president during World War II, would you have ordered the dropping of the atomic bomb? Why or why not?
- Have students choose any one of the Hiroshima victims’ statements on Worksheet 6D. Tell them to consider it as the middle of a story, and have them write a beginning and an ending for the story.

### **FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY**

Students can:

- Engage in the Japanese tradition of origami or paper folding to make paper cranes which symbolize peace and long life. In Japan today students make origami wreaths of a thousand paper cranes and send them to the peace park in Hiroshima to protest nuclear weapons. Students might read *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* to learn how this tradition began.

## **What Should Truman Do?**

It is July 17, 1945. You are a group of President Truman's closest advisors. For four years the United States and its allies have been at war with the Axis powers. Germany and Italy have recently surrendered. Japan's cities have been gutted and hundreds of thousands of its citizens killed as a result of American and British bombing raids. Yet, the Japanese still refuse to accept terms of "unconditional" surrender, demanded by the Allies. The Japanese insist on keeping their emperor, the symbol of Japanese culture. The Japanese believe that their emperor is a god, and that to die in his service is an honor. So they often fight to the last soldier. President Truman is aware, however, that the Japanese have asked the Russians to mediate a peace settlement with the United States.

Secretly, American military personnel and scientists have been working on a new weapon—an atomic bomb. Yesterday, July 16, 1945, President Truman met with his British and Russian allies at Potsdam and was informed that the bomb had been successfully tested. This atomic bomb has 2,000 times the blast power of what was previously the world's most destructive bomb.

Military leaders estimate that an invasion of Japan's home islands would result in the deaths of 1,000,000 American and British soldiers. They also state that if Japanese cities were warned in advance that a new, devastating bomb would be dropped, American prisoners of war might be moved to those cities. Some scientists propose that, instead of just dropping the bomb, the Japanese be invited to view a test demonstration of one A-bomb (the United States only has two) in some uninhabited place. Other advisors recommend that the atomic bomb be dropped on Japan to frighten the Soviets, who will soon enter the war against Japan, with an example of America's military power, and keep them in their place after the war. The Soviets already have established puppet communist regimes in the eastern European countries they overran as they advanced on Germany. It is feared that they plan to spread their system of government with its lack of freedom for the individual around the world.

President Truman, standing before a chalkboard labeled as follows, turns to you, his closest advisors, and says, "What can we do to bring the war with Japan to an end?" Help him complete the chart below.

<b>DECISION: WHAT CAN PRESIDENT TRUMAN DO TO END THE WAR WITH JAPAN?</b>		
<b>Possible Choices</b>	<b>Advantages Long &amp; Short Range</b>	<b>Disadvantages Long &amp; Short Range</b>
Invade Japan with millions of troops.		
Warn Japan very specifically of this terrible new weapon. Threaten to use it if Japan doesn't surrender.		
Don't give Japan any specific warning. Demand unconditional surrender and drop the bomb if Japan refuses.		
Invite the Japanese to a test demonstration firing of one A-bomb in a desert.		
Other:		



## *Truman's Decision*



The atomic bomb dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima fell approximately one mile from the site of this photograph. Nearly 100,000 men, women, and children were killed by the bomb.

President Truman explains his decision to drop the bomb:

“The Japanese were self-proclaimed fanatic warriors who made it clear that they preferred death to defeat in battle.... I pleaded with the Japanese to surrender in my speech announcing Germany’s surrender, but I was not too surprised when they refused.... General George Marshall estimated that we would probably lose 500,000 in taking the two islands.

I dropped the bomb on the advice of a committee of top political and military leaders. These advisors said it was necessary if we were to end the war quickly with a minimum loss of American lives. They further recommended that dropping the bomb on a deserted target would not bring an end to the war; dropping it on a Japanese city, they thought, would. My decision was a military one, and we therefore chose as targets cities with strategic significance. After the fire bombing of Tokyo, the Japanese didn’t surrender. After the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they did. I guess I was right after all.”

Adapted from Truman, Harry S., *Memoirs of Harry S. Truman*, Vol. I (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), pp. 419-20. Reprinted by permission of Stinson, Mag & Fizzell.

## Hiroshima Victims Speak



Picture from Wide World Photo as printed in Institute for World Order, *Crises in World Order: War Criminals, War Victims*, ed. Lawrence Metcalf (New York: Random House, 1974).

■ How many seconds or minutes had passed I could not tell, but regaining consciousness, I found myself lying on the ground covered with pieces of wood. When I stood up in a frantic effort to look around, there was darkness. Terribly frightened, I thought I was alone in a world of death, and groped for any light. My fear was so great I did not think anyone would truly understand. When I came to my senses, I found my clothes in shreds, and I was without my wooden sandals.

■ A mother, driven half-mad while looking for her child, was calling his name. At last she found him. His head looked like a boiled octopus. His eyes were half-closed, and his mouth was white, swollen, and pursed.

■ A woman who looked like an expectant mother was dead. At her side, a girl of about three years of age brought some water in an empty can she had found. She was trying to let her mother drink from it.

■ While taking my severely wounded wife out to the riverbank by the side of the hill of Nakahiro-machi, I was horrified, indeed, at the sight of a stark naked man standing in the rain with his eyeball in his palm. He looked to be in great pain, but there was nothing that I could do for him.

■ I just could not understand why our surroundings had changed so greatly in one instant. . . . I thought it might have been something which had nothing to do with the war—the collapse of the earth, which it was said would take place at the end of the world, and which I had read about as a child.

■ The street was cluttered with parts of houses that had slid into it, and with fallen telephone poles and wires. From every second or third house came the voices of people buried and abandoned, who invariably screamed, with formal politeness, “Tasukete kure! Help, if you please!” The priests recognized several ruins from which these cries came as the homes of friends, but because of the fire it was too late to help.

■ They held their arms bent (forward). . . . and their skin—not only on their hands but on their faces and bodies, too—hung down. . . . If there had been only one or two such people. . . perhaps I would not have had such a strong impression. But wherever I walked, I met these people. . . . Many of them died along the road. I can still picture them in my mind—like walking ghosts. They didn’t look like people of this world.

■ My face was so distorted and changed that people couldn’t tell who I was. After a while I could call others’ names but they couldn’t recognize me.

■ Suddenly, I wondered what had happened to my mother and sister. My mother was then forty-five, and my sister five years old. When the darkness began to fade, I found that there was nothing around me. My house, the next door neighbor’s house, and the next had all vanished. I was standing amid the ruins of my house. No one was around. It was quiet, very quiet—an eerie moment.