

## 12.9 Should the United States have dropped Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? (DBQ)

**Source:** Social Science Docket 6(2)

**Background:** Prior to the dropping of the atomic bomb, the United States was faced with a major decision. With the surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945, the United States and its allies still had to bring an end to the war in the Pacific. At the same time, a four-year top-secret scientific project to develop a “super” bomb neared completion. The Manhattan Project had cost nearly \$2 billion dollars. President Truman hoped deployment of the weapon, an atomic bomb, would make it possible to avoid a planned November invasion of Japan that would involve over 750,000 troops with projected casualties of over 30,000 men. The use of the atomic bomb on Japan would save American lives, bring about a quick end to World War II, and serve as a warning to the Soviet Union about American military might. Very few moral questions were raised at the time and the decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seems almost inevitable. A 1946 account of the impact of the bombing on the people of Hiroshima finally forced the American people to reconsider. Originally published in *The New Yorker* magazine, John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* helped to penetrate the cloud of self-righteousness that had developed in the United States about the use of the atomic bomb. Before its publication, the American public was generally ignorant about just how destructive the bomb was. Photographs from Hiroshima focused on property damage and statistics about the loss of life hardly told the entire story. Hersey’s work, which focused on six survivors, put a human face on the casualties and showed Americans why the atomic bomb was so devastating. Based on what now know and the documents in this package, do the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki constitute war crimes or genocide?

### Should the United States have dropped Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

A. Excerpt from statement by President Harry Truman, August 6, 1945.

Source: [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/bomb/small/mb10.htm](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/small/mb10.htm)

Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima and destroyed its usefulness to the enemy. It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East. We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city. We shall destroy their docks, their factories, and their communications. Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan’s power to make war. It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. 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. Behind this air attack will follow sea and land forces in such number that and power as they have not yet seen and with the fighting skill of which they are already well aware.

#### Guiding Questions

1. What is the purpose of President Truman’s statement?
2. Why does the President refer to the rejection of the Potsdam ultimatum in this statement?
3. What does he mean when he says the Japanese can expect a “rain of ruin from the air?”

D. Leaflet dropped on cities in Japan warning civilians about the atomic bomb, August 6, 1945.

Source: [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/truman/psources/ps\\_leaflets.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/truman/psources/ps_leaflets.html)

TO THE JAPANESE PEOPLE: America asks that you take immediate heed of what we say on this leaflet. We are in possession of the most destructive explosive ever devised by man. A single one of our newly developed atomic bombs is actually the equivalent in explosive power to what 2000 of our giant B-29s can carry on a single mission. This awful fact is for you to ponder and we solemnly assure you it is grimly accurate. We have just begun to use this weapon against your homeland. If you still have any doubt, make inquiry as to what happened to Hiroshima when just one atomic bomb fell on that city. Before using this bomb to destroy every resource of the military by which they are prolonging this useless war, we ask that you now petition the Emperor to end the war. Our president has outlined for you the thirteen consequences of an honorable surrender. We urge that you accept these consequences and begin the work of building a new, better and peace-loving Japan. You should take steps now to cease military resistance. Otherwise, we shall resolutely employ this bomb and all our other superior weapons to promptly and forcefully end the war. EVACUATE YOUR CITIES.

### Guiding Questions

1. What does the leaflet warn about?
2. What is the United States demanding?
3. In your opinion, why did the United States make this direct appeal to the Japanese public?

C. Excerpt from President Truman's speech to the nation on August 9, 1945, shortly after the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. Source: <http://www.dannen.com/decision/hst-ag09.html>

The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians. But that attack is only a warning of things to come. If Japan does not surrender, bombs will have to be dropped on her war industries and, unfortunately, thousands of civilian lives will be lost. I urge Japanese civilians to leave industrial cities immediately, and save themselves from destruction. We shall continue to use it until we completely destroy Japan's power to make war. Only a Japanese surrender will stop us.

### Guiding Questions

1. Why do you think the president refers to Hiroshima as "a military base"?
2. Why would the U.S. president urge Japanese civilians to "save themselves from destruction"?

D. Excerpt from letter from President Truman to Sen. Richard Russell, August 9, 1945.

Source: [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/bomb/large/opinions\\_responses/bmd2-1.htm](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/opinions_responses/bmd2-1.htm)

I know that Japan is a terribly cruel and uncivilized nation in warfare but I can't bring myself to believe that, because they are beasts, we should ourselves act in the same manner. For myself, I certainly regret the necessity of wiping out whole populations because of the "pigheadedness" of the leaders of a nation and, for your information, I am not going to do it unless it is absolutely necessary. It is my opinion that after the Russians enter into war the Japanese will very shortly fold up. My object is to save as many American lives as possible but I also have a humane feeling for the women and children in Japan.

### Guiding Questions

1. How did President Truman describe Japan?
2. In your opinion, why did he describe Japan in this way?
3. If his assessment of Japan was accurate, did that justify the bombings? Explain.

E. Images of Nuclear Destruction. Source: <http://www.spaceformusic.com/symposium2000/abombexhibit.html>



City of Hiroshima after nuclear attack



Makeshift hospital at Primary School

### Guiding Questions

1. Describe the city of Hiroshima following the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

2. What emotions are evoked by these images?

F. From editorial in the *Nippon Times*, August 10, 1945. Source; *America in World War II*, p. 803.

How can a human being with any claim to a sense of moral responsibility deliberately let loose an instrument of destruction which can at one stroke annihilate an appalling segment of mankind? This is not war; this is not even murder; this is pure nihilism. This is a crime against God and humanity which strikes at the very basis of moral existence. The crime of the Americans stands out in ghastly repulsiveness all the more for the ironic contradiction it affords to their lying pretensions. For in their noisy statements, they have always claimed to be the champions of fairness and humanitarianism. But now beside the latest technique of total destruction which the Americans have adopted, their earlier crimes pale into relative insignificance. What more barbarous atrocity can there be than to wipe out at one stroke the population of a whole city without distinction – men, women, and children; the aged, the weak, the infirm; those in positions of authority, and those with no power at all; all snuffed out without being given a chance of lifting even a finger in either defense or defiance!

The United States may claim, in a lame attempt to raise a pretext in justification of its latest action, that a policy of utter annihilation is necessitated by Japan's failure to heed the recent demand for unconditional surrender. But the question of surrendering or not surrendering certainly can have not the slightest relevance to the question of whether it is justifiable to use a method which under any circumstances is strictly condemned alike by the principles of international law and of morality. For this American outrage against the fundamental moral sense of mankind, Japan must proclaim to the world its protest against the United States, which has made itself the arch-enemy of humanity.

#### **Guiding Questions**

1. What is the purpose of this editorial?
2. What are the most important charges the editors are making?
3. In your opinion, is a Japanese newspaper justified in making these charges? Explain.

G. Statement by Emperor Hirohito, accepting the Potsdam Declaration, August 14, 1945.

Source: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/hirohito.htm>

After pondering deeply the general trends of the world and the actual conditions obtaining in our empire today, we have decided to effect a settlement of the present situation by resorting to an extraordinary measure. We have ordered our Government to communicate to the Governments of the United States, Great Britain, China and the Soviet Union that our empire accepts the provisions of their joint declaration. We declared war on America and Britain out of our sincere desire to insure Japan's self-preservation and the stabilization of East Asia, it being far from our thought either to infringe upon the sovereignty of other nations or to embark upon territorial aggrandizement. But now the war has lasted for nearly four years. Despite the best that has been done by everyone, the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage, while the general trends of the world have all turned against her interest. Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is, indeed, incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should we continue to fight, it would not only result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization.

#### **Guiding Questions**

1. What is the purpose of this statement by the Emperor?
2. What reason does he give for the declaration of war on America and Britain?
3. In your opinion, what is the main reason for the Japanese issuing this statement?

H. Excerpt from petition to the President of the United States signed by 67 atomic scientists, signed in July 1945 and released to the public on August 17, 1945. Source: <http://www.dannen.com/decision/45-07-17.html>

This war has to be brought speedily to a successful conclusion and attacks by atomic bombs may very well be an effective method of warfare. We feel, however, that such attacks on Japan could not be justified. The development of atomic power will provide the nations with new means of destruction. Thus a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for purpose of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.

### Guiding Questions

1. What is the position of the atomic scientists on the use of a nuclear weapon?
2. Why do you think scientists who developed this capability would take this position?

I. Comparing the Destruction. Source: <http://www.ww2guide.com/atombomb.shtml>

	Hiroshima	Nagasaki	Fire Bombing of Tokyo
Estimated Dead/Missing	70,000-80,000	35,000-40,000	83,000
Wounded	70,000	40,000	102,000
Total Casualties	140,000-150,000	75,000-80,000	185,000
Area Destroyed	4.7 sq. miles	1.8 sq. miles	15,8 sq. miles
Weapons	"Little Boy," 1 atomic bomb	"Fat Man," 1 atomic bomb	1,667 tons of TNT

### Guiding Questions

1. What were the combined total casualties from the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?
2. Why is the atomic bomb such a powerful weapon?