

Part II: The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

The decision to drop the atomic bomb in World War II has come under heavy scrutiny since the United States dropped the first on August 6, 1945 and the second on August 9, 1945. After the bombs' use, President Harry S. Truman and the United States government led U.S. citizens to believe that dropping the atomic bomb would save close to 500,000 U.S. soldiers from certain death or injury. In recent years, historians have argued that this number was exaggerated to convince the world that the atomic bomb was necessary to end the war with Japan. Moreover, historians have argued that Japan would have surrendered unconditionally if the United States and its allies would have agreed to leave the Japanese emperor on the throne. The Allies chose not to pursue this potential avenue for surrender. Finally, the Japanese may have surrendered anyway because it was apparent at the time that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) was going to come into the war against Japan. Some historians argue that the United States decided to drop the bomb in order to establish a powerful post-war position with the Soviet Union. Because Japan was already on the threshold of collapse, the entrance of the Soviet Union into the war would certainly end Japanese participation in World War II. The argument over the atomic bomb has significant ramifications for those studying history.¹ First, this argument demonstrates that understanding of historical events can change over time as new information becomes available. In the last ten years, new information has been found that clearly shows that President Truman and other government officials knew that dropping the atomic bomb was not necessary to force Japan to surrender. Second, the discussion on the validity of dropping the atomic bomb should cause historians and citizens alike to ask more questions about decisions that current and future political leaders ask the public to support.

1. Students will understand the controversy over the decision to drop the atomic bomb through class discussion.

Resources: Gar Alperovitz's *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth*.

Click here for a picture of the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima.

<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/photographs/displayimage.php?pointer=27139&rr=&people=&listid=3>

Click here for a picture of Hiroshima after the atomic bomb was dropped.

<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/photographs/view.php?id=21791>

Click here for a picture of the atomic bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki.

<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/photographs/displayimage.php?pointer=587&rr=&people=&listid=0>

Click here for a picture of the atomic bomb exploding in Nagasaki.

<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/photographs/displayimage.php?pointer=2087&rr=&people=&listid=2>

¹ Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Englehardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996).

2. Students will listen to a clip from the Paul McGilvra interview in which McGilvra discusses the dropping of the atomic bomb. Students will then answer the following questions about the clip. **Play Clip B [2:34 minutes]**
 - a. How did McGilvra feel about the decision to drop the atomic bomb?
 - b. Do you think his views were consistent with the view of other soldiers at the time? Of other U.S. citizens?
 - c. Based on the knowledge that you now have on the decision to drop the atomic bomb, what do you think about how McGilvra feels?
 - d. Do you think that McGilvra would change his mind about the decision to drop the atomic bomb if he was aware of current day information?

3. Students will read the briefing from the interim committee found on the following link from the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum and answer the following questions.
http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/documents/index.php?documentdate=1945-05-09&documentid=35&studycollectionid=abomb&pagenumber=1
 - a. Why was this committee meeting held?
 - b. What do you think was the most important information found in this briefing? Why?
 - c. Did you find any information in this briefing that supports or opposes the decision to drop the atomic bomb?

4. Students will write a one page paper describing the decision to drop the atomic bomb. Students should discuss if the decision to drop the bomb was correct and students should give supporting evidence for the argument.

5. Students will each give a 3-5 minute presentation in class. The student's presentation will take the form of a news anchor outlining the decision to drop the atomic bomb.