

## Choices: Truman, Hirohito, and the Atomic Bomb

**In summer 1945, President Truman focused on two choices to end the war with Japan: invade or use the atomic bomb. Truman ordered the bomb dropped on two Japanese cities. His decision created a controversy that is with us today.**

On August 6, 1945, the world changed forever. A single American B-29 bomber, the *Enola Gay*, dropped one atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. About 70,000 persons, some military but mostly civilian, perished in the blast and the firestorm that resulted from it. Another 50,000 died later from injuries and radiation sickness. Three days after Hiroshima, some 60,000 Japanese died when a plane dropped a second bomb on Nagasaki.

The intentional bombing of civilians had been going on for quite some time--first by the Germans and Japanese and then by the British and Americans. About 100,000 Japanese died during American fire bombing raids on Tokyo five months before Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But what made atomic bombs even more frightful were the largely unknown short- and long-term effects of radiation and their capacity for worldwide destruction.

### Truman: "The Most Terrible Bomb"

Shortly after Hitler began World War II in Europe, physicists Leo Szilard and Albert Einstein wrote a [letter](#) to President Roosevelt. They urged him to set up a project to develop an atomic bomb, which they believed Germany was already working on. Roosevelt initiated the ["Manhattan Project"](#) in 1941. He placed General Leslie R. Groves in command of a group of scientists headed by J. Robert Oppenheimer. From the very beginning, almost everyone involved in this project believed that America would use the atomic bomb to end the war.

When [Roosevelt died](#) on April 12, 1945, Vice President Harry S. Truman became president. Unfortunately, Roosevelt had never included his vice president in discussions about the atomic bomb. Two weeks after becoming president, he was finally fully briefed about "the gadget," as General Groves called the bomb.

The bomb was not ready for testing before Germany unconditionally surrendered on May 7, 1945. Seeking advice, as the war in the Pacific continued, Truman authorized a group of civilian leaders and scientists to make recommendations on its use. Headed by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, the so-called [Interim Committee](#) decided to reaffirm the long-held policy of using the atomic bomb when it was ready.

The Interim Committee also recommended against giving the Japanese any warning or demonstrating the bomb on some uninhabited area. Committee members wanted to assure a total surprise to shock the Japanese government and people into quickly surrendering. The committee agreed that the "most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses."

The Interim Committee additionally concluded that using the atomic bomb to end the war would make the Soviet Union "more manageable" in the postwar world.

After being briefed on the Interim Committee's recommendations, Truman met with his top military advisors on June 11. Since America had not yet tested the bomb, this group went ahead with plans for an invasion of Japan. Truman wanted to know the number of expected casualties (dead, wounded, and missing). The casualty estimates for the projected invasion varied greatly and became the subject of much controversy after the war. The Army-Navy estimate for the invasion was about 200,000 American casualties, which would have included 50,000 killed.

Dreading the idea of an invasion of Japan, Truman traveled to [Potsdam](#), Germany, to meet with the other Allied leaders in mid-July 1945. Truman was anxious to get [Joseph Stalin](#), the leader of the Soviet Union, to enter the war against Japan. Stalin had previously promised to do this after Germany's defeat even though he had signed a non-aggression treaty with Japan early in the war.

During the conference, the Americans received a message stating that a bomb had been successfully tested in New Mexico. Truman's attitude brightened, and he no longer seemed so intent on pressuring the Russians to declare war on Japan.

While still at Potsdam, Truman authorized the military to use atomic bombs "when ready but not sooner than August 2." Two atomic bombs were available, and two more were nearing completion. The war planners had selected four target cities including Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Neither city contained major military or industrial installations. They chose them mainly because conventional bombing had already leveled other major cities.

No real debate ever took place among top U.S. military and civilian leaders on whether to drop on Japan what Truman described in his [diary](#) as "the most terrible bomb in the history of the world." Only a small group of scientists involved in the Manhattan Project opposed dropping it. They circulated a petition warning of a nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union after the war if America used atomic bombs against Japan. Ironically, the scientist that led this petition effort, [Leo Szilard](#), had also written the letter with Einstein asking Roosevelt to build the bomb.

At the end of the Potsdam Conference on July 26, the Allies at war with Japan issued a [proclamation](#). They demanded the "unconditional surrender" of the Japanese armed forces. This meant that the Allies would not consider negotiating peace terms. The declaration also called for the Japanese people to form a new government, which put the future of the Japanese emperor in doubt. It did not mention the atomic bomb or the pending entry of the Soviet Union into the war. But the declaration warned that if Japan did not immediately surrender unconditionally, it would face "prompt and utter destruction."

**Hirohito: "We Must Bow to the Inevitable"**

Japan's leaders knew nothing about the atomic bomb and little about other U.S. war plans. But Truman and his advisers knew something about what the Japanese leaders were saying and doing. American intelligence had broken Japan's secret code.

By summer 1945, Japan was a nation on the edge of defeat. Its navy hardly existed. Its best airplane pilots had been killed. Its large armies lay scattered and isolated throughout Asia. The American naval blockade of Japan had stopped most shipping, which created major shortages of food and oil. Continuing American bombing raids had leveled most major Japanese cities, killing 200,000 persons.

Still, Japan fought on. From April to June 1944 during the U.S. invasion of [Okinawa](#), an island 400 miles from the Japanese homeland, Japanese forces waged a fierce and desperate battle. Inspired by warrior traditions, the soldiers held on for weeks preferring to die in suicide charges or by their own hand than to surrender. The navy launched waves of suicide airplane attacks on the U.S. ships supporting the invasion. Even many Japanese civilians living on the island killed themselves to avoid capture by the Americans. In finally conquering the island, U.S. forces suffered 48,000 casualties.

In spite of the loss of Okinawa and overwhelming U.S. military superiority, the Japanese government was deadlocked about what to do. On the one hand, Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki took office in April 1945 with the goal of ending the hopeless war effort. Suzuki, his foreign minister, and others in the government attempted to get the Soviet Union to act as a go-between in negotiating conditions of surrender to end the war with the United States, Britain, and China. Suzuki was not aware that Stalin had already decided to declare war on Japan in a few months.

Other members of the Japanese government and military leadership strongly opposed surrendering. They argued that Japan should accept "the honorable death of a hundred million" rather than give up. They moved ahead with plans for defending the homeland including the use of 350,000 troops, preparing thousands of pilots and planes for kamikaze attacks and mobilization of hundreds of thousands of civilians, including women, as home defense fighters. They hoped that these measures could repel an American invasion and force the United States to end the war on terms more beneficial to Japan.

Considered a sacred figure in Japanese society, Emperor Hirohito normally remained above government politics. Throughout most of the war, Hirohito never openly opposed any decisions made by Japan's leaders. For instance, Hirohito was present when the decision was made to attack Pearl Harbor, but he remained silent. By early 1945, however, Hirohito had concluded that there should be "a swift termination of the war." When Okinawa fell to the Americans in June, he sent a personal representative to Moscow seeking terms of peace from the Allies.

By August, time had run out for the divided Japanese government and Emperor Hirohito. On August 6, the *Enola Gay* dropped the first atomic bomb on [Hiroshima](#). The political

and military leaders still could not agree what to do. Hirohito, now speaking more forcefully than ever before, declared, "We must bow to the inevitable."

On August 9, disaster struck from two directions. The Soviet Union declared war on Japan, and the United States dropped the second atomic bomb on [Nagasaki](#). The government remained paralyzed. The leaders could agree on only one thing: The emperor's position in Japanese society must remain at all cost.

Finally, Prime Minister Suzuki took the unheard-of step of calling upon the emperor himself to break the deadlock between those favoring surrender and those who wanted to fight on. After listening to both sides, Hirohito said that "continuing the war can only mean destruction for the nation." He then declared that Japan must accept surrender.

On August 10, Suzuki sent a notice of surrender to the Allies with the condition that the emperor would remain as the "sovereign ruler" of Japan. The Allies accepted on one condition. The emperor must yield authority to the supreme commander of the forces occupying Japan until a new government was established "by the truly expressed will of the people." Some Japanese leaders wanted to reject this requirement. But Hirohito announced that he agreed to the Allied terms. All top civilian and military leaders then pledged to obey the emperor's wishes. The war was over.

### **Other Choices**

The war was over, but the debate over how it ended had just begun. In the years that followed, President Truman steadfastly defended his decision to use the atomic bombs. He argued that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced the Japanese to surrender quickly, thus avoiding an invasion that would have cost the lives of thousands of Americans. "I'd do it again," Truman often said.

Truman's advisers had focused mainly on the choice between an invasion and dropping the bomb. From hindsight, scholars researching wartime documents have determined that there were several other options for ending the war:

**1. Continue the conventional bombings and blockade.** Truman could have relied on the relentless and devastating B-29 firebombing raids on Japan's cities combined with the naval blockade to wear down Japanese resistance and force their surrender.

Scholars critical of this approach point out that strategic bombing may have taken some time to force a surrender putting American pilots, troops and sailors at risk. In addition, many more Japanese civilians may have died using this option than were killed in the two atomic raids.

**2. Demonstrate the atomic bomb.** By demonstrating the atomic bomb, Truman could have shown the Japanese leaders, including Hirohito, that their nation faced total destruction if they did not surrender immediately.

Other scholars point out that the U.S. had only two atomic bombs ready for use and two more in development. The technology was brand new and delivering the bombs was very difficult. A failure of the demonstration might have actually encouraged Japanese resistance and in any case would have given them a chance to take countermeasures.

**3. Wait for the Russians.** Truman could have waited a few more weeks for the Russians to declare war on Japan. The threat of invasion and occupation by both the Americans and Russians may have had an even more shocking effect on the Japanese leadership than the atomic bombings.

Scholars critical of this approach say it is not clear what Japan might have done in response to a declaration of war by the Soviets. Japanese forces in Asia were already stranded and largely abandoned. It would have taken Soviet forces some time to threaten mainland Japan, and the Japanese already faced overwhelming force from the Americans. Some scholars believe that the United States still would have been faced with an invasion of Japan and the Soviets would have had more time to bring more of Asia under Communist domination.

**4. Negotiate peace.** Truman knew that Suzuki and Hirohito were trying to find a way to negotiate an end to the war. He could have discussed peace terms with them, but instead refused to consider anything but "unconditional surrender."

Official allied policy was for unconditional surrender for Japan, just as it had been for the Nazi regime. Some scholars question whether arranging negotiations might not have strengthened the war faction of the Japanese government by showing weakness on the part of the allies. They also might have encouraged greater demands on the part of the Japanese, including preservation of the military, and given them more time to prepare for invasion.

**5. Keep the emperor.** The Japanese leaders might have decided to surrender earlier if Truman and the Allies had assured them that they would neither abolish the position of the emperor nor try Hirohito as a war criminal.

Some scholars point out that the Japanese agreed to surrender only after the bomb was dropped and doubt that the concession about the emperor by itself would have led to immediate surrender.

In the end, Truman concluded that none of these choices would have ended the war as quickly as an atomic attack. At the time, Truman was under tremendous pressure from the American public to end the long, horrible war against a hated enemy as fast as possible and "bring the boys home." Few of the thousands of American troops being transferred from Europe to prepare for Japan's invasion criticized Truman's decision. For many, it saved their lives.

Did Truman make the right decision? More than 50 years later, this question remains unsettled.

### **For Discussion and Writing**

1. Why did President Truman order the use of atomic bombs against Japan?
2. What role did Emperor Hirohito play in the surrender of Japan?
3. Some have argued that there really was very little difference in the use of atomic bombs and conventional bombs against Japan. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

### **For Further Information**

[Hiroshima & Nagasaki](#)

["The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" Gar Alperovitz and the H-net Debate](#)

[H I R O S H I M A: Recommended Books For Students](#)

[Documents Relating to American Foreign Policy: Hiroshima](#)

[Documents Relating to the Development of the Atomic Bomb and Its use on Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#)

### **ACTIVITY: Choices: Ending the War with Japan**

In this activity, students will role play members of a committee of advisers to President Truman. This committee must debate the choices and then make a recommendation to the president on how to end the war.

**A.** Form small groups and review the president's options: (1) Continue the conventional bombings and blockade; (2) Demonstrate the atomic bomb; (3) Wait for the Russians; (4) Negotiate peace; (5) Keep the emperor; or (6) Use the atomic bombs.

**B.** After each group meets, the committee as a whole should discuss and decide on a recommendation. It may be one of the choices listed in the article or some variation or combination of them.