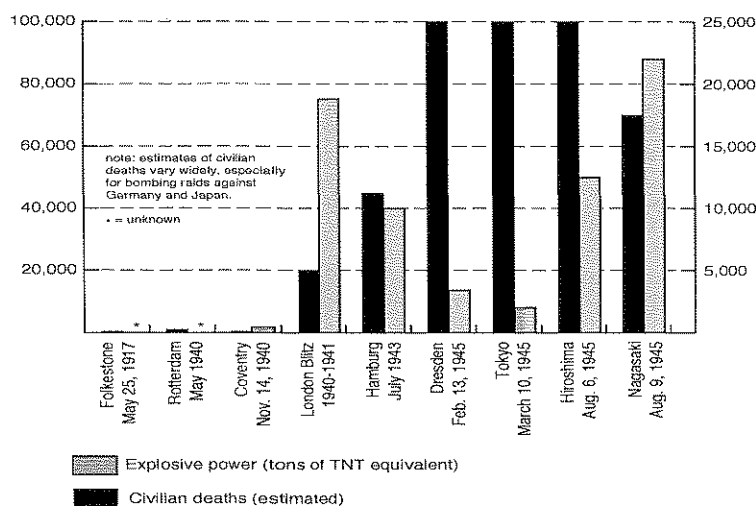


## MAKING CONNECTIONS: ISSUES RAISED BY THE ATOMIC BOMB

Over half a century has passed since the concluding days of World War II. The radiation that killed tens of thousands of people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki has largely disappeared. The number of living survivors shrinks with each passing year. And yet, many of the issues surrounding the U.S. decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan remain as controversial as ever.

This section of the unit is meant to engage you in the political and ethical questions that have emerged from the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As you will see, the most hotly debated issues are those that touch on values that influence the direction of current U.S. foreign policy. Each issue concludes with discussion questions and ideas for additional research.

The Atomic Bombs in Perspective



### ISSUE #1: THE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR USING THE BOMB

The morality of the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan has been debated vigorously since August 1945. In his radio address to the nation on August 12, three days after the Nagasaki bombing and two days before the surrender of Japan, President Truman recognized the moral issues involved and strongly defended his decision:

*"I realize the tragic significance of the atomic bomb. Its production and its use were not lightly undertaken by this government. But we knew that our enemies were on the search for it. We know now how close they were to finding it. And we know the disaster which would have come to this nation and to all peaceful nations, to all civilizations, if they had found it first.*

*"That is why we felt compelled to undertake the long and uncertain and costly labor of discovery and production. We won the race of discovery against the Germans. Having found the bomb we have used it.*

*"We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned the pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have 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. Only a Japanese surrender will stop us."*

There were also Americans who objected to their country's wartime policy. *New York Times* correspondent Hanson Baldwin saw the use of the atomic bomb as the culmination of an immoral strategy that began with the first bombing raids against German and Japanese cities. Baldwin expressed his opinions in September 1945:

*"The United States has sacrificed its moral leadership of the world. Actually the first use of the atomic bomb did not mark the end – it is to be hoped the temporary end – of that leadership. The mass bombing of European cities, miscalled 'precision' bombing but actually area bombing in its effects, was just as terrible for the civilian men, women and children killed and wounded as for those blasted by the atomic bomb.*

"The fire attacks upon Japanese cities burned people to death fully as irrevocably as did the atomic bomb. The atomic bomb had a quantitative advantage in death and annihilation; more people were killed, more burned, more homes destroyed, but actually the moral principle involved in its use was no different from that established a thousand times before in the war.

"It may be argued with perfect validity that the Germans and the Japanese started the evil practices, and that there is no crime worse than war itself. It may also be argued that it is futile to try to make war moral; in fact that there is a certain humanity about trying to make it so horrible that it will be ended quickly, thus saving many lives at the expense of a relatively few, as in the case of Japan or in the ultimate case by making war so annihilating and terrible that it will be made impossible.

"Regardless of the validity of these arguments, in the mind of many foreigners and of a considerable number of Americans, the atomic bomb was not only a tremendous scientific achievement; it marked the end of the moral leadership of America."

Surveys of public opinion shortly after the end of World War II indicated that a strong majority of Americans agreed with Truman. The following survey results were published in *Fortune* magazine in December 1945.

**Survey Question: How Should the Atomic Bombs Have Been Used to End the War Against Japan?**

Statement	Percentage in Agreement
1. We should not have used any atomic bombs at all.....	4.5 percent
2. We should have dropped the first one on some unpopulated region, to show the Japanese its power, and dropped the second one on a city only if they hadn't surrendered.....	13.8 percent
3. We should have used the two bombs on cities just as we did.....	53.5 percent
4. We should have quickly used many more of them before Japan had a chance to surrender.....	22.7 percent
5. Don't know.....	5.5 percent

**Questions for discussion:**

1. Discuss how President Truman's address draws on the traditional concepts of "just war" and "just means," and the 20th century experience with total war. On whom does Truman place the moral responsibility for the use and consequences of the atomic bombs? Compare his position to the argument offered by General William Sherman to justify his army's march through Georgia during the Civil War.

2. How would Hanson Baldwin have judged Truman's argument for using the atomic bomb. When, in Baldwin's opinion, did the United States lose its moral leadership? Do you agree? What factors account for the results of the public opinion survey?

**Suggestions for further research:**

1. Many of the U.S. officials who had a voice in the decision to use the atomic bomb wrote first-hand accounts of their involvement after the war. Compare how President Truman, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Secretary of State James Byrnes, and General Leslie Groves viewed the moral issues connected to the atomic bomb.

**ISSUE #2: "LITTLE BOY," "FAT MAN," AND JAPAN'S SURRENDER**

In 1946, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey concluded, "Certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered, even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been contemplated."

For half a century, historians have argued vigorously about America's use of the atomic bomb against Japan. Most have agreed that Japan eventually would have surrendered as a result of the U.S. blockade, aerial bombardment, and ultimate invasion of the Japanese main islands. The main areas of controversy have revolved around the Truman administration's emphasis on ending the war as quickly as possible and whether the atomic bomb was necessary to force Japan to accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration.

Many have focused in particular on Japan's desperate appeal to the Soviet Union to act as a mediator in the last months of the war. The historical record suggests that moderate officials within the Japanese government took the first steps to end the war in the Pacific before Truman's decision to begin the atomic bombing of Japan. On August 2, 1945, the Japanese foreign minister cabled the Japanese ambassador in Moscow to summarize the government's view:

*"At present, in accordance with the Imperial will, there is unanimous determination to ask the good offices of the Russians in ending the war....Under the circumstances there is a disposition to make the Potsdam Declaration the basis of our study concerning terms....If we should let one day slip by, the present situation may result in a thousand years of regret."*

The ambassador replied two days later:

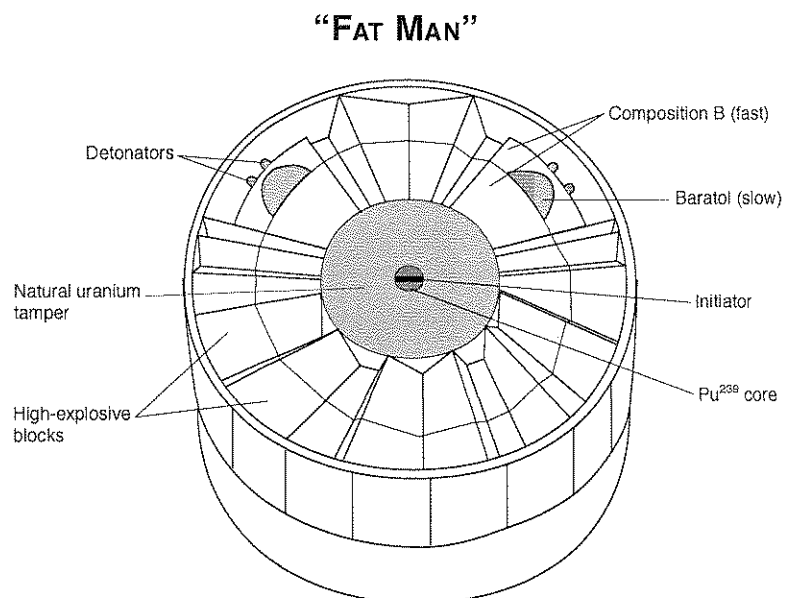
*"The [Potsdam] Declaration already provides a basis for ending the war. Therefore, if Russia assumes the role of mediator...the action will have to be carried out on this basis. I feel that [your] statement is an extremely auspicious one."*

The Allied demand in the Potsdam Declaration for Japan's unconditional surrender created confusion among Japanese policymakers in the final days of the war. The Japanese were uncertain what the Allied leaders meant by the declaration. Would Japan's emperor be deposed and tried as a war criminal? Would the Japanese as a nation be permanently occupied, enslaved, and stripped of identity and honor?

U.S. military intelligence intercepted and decoded the above exchange between the Japanese foreign minister and Japan's ambassador in Moscow. U.S. leaders, however, did not further clarify the meaning of unconditional surrender. Some historians maintain that the Japanese would have surrendered before the attack on Hiroshima if the United States had indicated that their emperor could remain as a constitutional monarch, like King George VI of Britain. (In fact, the United States did allow Emperor Hirohito to reign as a constitutional monarch after the war.) Others maintain that the supporters of surrender represented a minority within the Japanese government before the atomic bomb attacks.

Questions about Japanese peace efforts in 1945 also figure prominently in another controversial topic, the U.S. atomic bomb attack against Nagasaki on August 9, three days after the bombing of Hiroshima. The atomic bombing of Nagasaki grew out of President Truman's decision of July 24, 1945, to authorize the military to begin dropping atomic bombs on Japan to force the Japanese to surrender unconditionally. Truman did not specify how many bombs should have been used and where they should have been dropped.

When the Japanese government did not respond to the U.S. demand for unconditional surrender after the destruction of



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Hiroshima, the 509 Composite Group was ordered to drop "Fat Man" over Nagasaki. The next day, Truman ordered a halt to the atomic bombing of Japan. On August 14, the Japanese surrendered. (Another atomic bomb was scheduled to be available after August 17.)

**Questions for discussion:**

1. The three-day gap between the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks has long been a target of critics of the Truman administration's policies. President Truman never expressed regret for his decision to use atomic bombs against Japan. However, he ordered a halt to the campaign the day after the attack on Nagasaki. Should he have cancelled the atomic bombing of Nagasaki to give the Japanese more time to respond to the surrender demands? If the Japanese had not surrendered on August 14, should the United States have dropped a third atomic bomb?

2. The "what if" questions of history are both fascinating and frustrating. The final days of World War II produced many of them. What if the United States had offered to open peace negotiations with Japan? What if the United States had demonstrated the power of the atomic bomb on a deserted Pacific island? ~~How might the course of his-~~

#### **ISSUE #4: THE SOVIET UNION, NOT JAPAN, WAS THE REAL TARGET OF THE ATOMIC BOMB**

Some historians maintain that U.S. relations with the Soviet Union were the decisive factor in President Truman's decision to drop atomic bombs against Japan. They point to the events following the end of the war in Europe to support their argument.

In February 1945, at the Yalta Conference of Allied leaders, President Roosevelt had eagerly sought Soviet participation in the war against Japan. Roosevelt hoped that a Soviet attack against Japanese forces in China would bring the war to a swift conclusion and reduce the number of American casualties. In exchange for Soviet support, the president told Josef Stalin that the Soviet Union would be granted territorial concessions in East Asia.

The successful testing of the atomic bomb in July 1945 changed American attitudes. Many top U.S. leaders

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believed that the war against Japan could be ended before the Soviets were scheduled to enter the conflict in mid-August. Their view was also influenced by the deepening tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union in Europe.

The U.S.-Soviet wartime alliance had never been particularly warm. With the end of the fighting, the two countries were increasingly at odds over the future of Eastern Europe and Germany and the continuation of U.S. Lend/Lease aid to help the Soviets rebuild their country.

In general, Truman adopted a tougher line against the Soviets than Roosevelt had. The president told his advisors, "I intend to be firm in my dealings with the Soviet government," and "If the Russians did not wish to join us [in forming the United Nations] they could go to hell." The plain-talking former senator from Missouri even "chewed out" the Soviet foreign minister at a White House meeting.

An indication of the thinking inside the Truman administration is found in a diary entry made by Secretary of War Henry Stimson in mid-May 1945. In his diary, Stimson discusses postponing the president's meeting with Stalin at Potsdam until after the first test of the atomic bomb.

*"I tried to point out the difficulties which existed [with the Soviet Union] and I thought it was premature to ask those questions [regarding our relations with the Soviet Union]; at least we were not yet in a position to answer them. The trouble is that the President has now promised apparently to meet Stalin and Churchill on the first of July and at that time these questions will become burning and it may be necessary to have it out with Russia on her relations to Manchuria and Port Arthur and various other parts of North China, and also the relations of China to us. Over such a tangled weave of problems [the atomic] secret would be dominant and yet we will not know until after that time probably, until after that meeting, whether this is a weapon in our hands or not. We think it will be, shortly afterwards, but it seems a terrible thing to gamble with such big stakes in diplomacy without having your master card in your hand."*

In fact, the Potsdam Conference was delayed until mid-July. When the U.S. delegation reached Germany, its members were anxiously awaiting the results of the Trinity test. On the eve of his first meeting with the Soviets in Potsdam, President Truman declared to an associate, "If it explodes, as I think it will, I'll certainly have a hammer on those boys [the Soviets]!" On July 24, eight days after the Trinity explosion and just before the close of the conference, Truman casually informed Stalin that the United States had "a new weapon of unusual destructive force." No further details were offered. Stalin replied that he was glad to hear it and hoped the United States would make "good use of it against the Japanese." Stalin was not surprised. Soviet intelligence operations had been closely following the Manhattan Project.

#### **Questions for discussion:**

① Some historians have suggested that Truman and his advisors dropped the atomic bombs primarily to influence the Soviet Union. Assuming their view is correct, what is your attitude toward the decision? Did the goal of restraining the Soviet Union justify the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Can you find examples from U.S. history since World War II in which the United States has taken military action against a country to influence the policies of another country?

### **ISSUE #7: THE CRUSADE AGAINST EVIL AND THE ENDS-MEANS DILEMMA**

The global struggle that began for the United States with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was seen by U.S. leaders and the American people as much more than Karl von Clausewitz's view of war as "a continuation of politics by other means." Rather, Americans considered it a contest between good and evil, pitting God-fearing, democratic peoples against godless, fascist regimes determined to extinguish the central values of Western civilization. President Roosevelt set the tone of the war in his State of the Union address on January 6, 1942, less than

one month after “the day of infamy.”

*“Our enemies are guided by brutal cynicism, by unholy contempt for the human race. We are inspired by a faith which goes back through all the years to the first chapter of the Book of Genesis: ‘God created man in His image.’ We on our side are striving to be true to that divine heritage....Those on the other side are striving to destroy this deep belief and to create a world in their own image – a world of tyranny and cruelty and serfdom.*

*“That is the conflict that day and night now pervades our lives. No compromise can end that conflict. There never has been – there never can be – successful compromise between good and evil. Only total victory can reward the champions of tolerance and decency and freedom and faith.”*

Roosevelt’s language was strikingly similar to that used by Christian crusaders in the Middle Ages to describe the Muslims. During the war, Allied leaders recounted the torture and execution of prisoners and the reign of terror imposed on conquered peoples by the Axis as proof that the aggressors were acting far beyond the bounds of civilized behavior. Atrocities committed by Japanese forces, in particular, were widely reported in the American press.

The war against the Axis became a crusade. Those fighting on behalf of evil were themselves seen as evil. In contrast, U.S. actions, whatever the outcome, were labeled as good. Since the ends of the war effort were defined as the survival of core values, most Americans believed that any and all means were potentially justified, and that only unconditional surrender was acceptable. A decade after the war, a British historian condemned the Allied position.

*“It was the insistence on unconditional surrender that was the root of all evil. The connection between such a demand and the need to use the most ferocious methods of warfare will be obvious. And in itself the proposal of an unlimited objective in war is stupid and barbarous. For men to choose to kill the innocent as a means to their ends is always murder....In the bombing of cities it was certainly decided to kill the innocent as a means to an end.”*

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**Questions for discussion:**

- ① Do you think that it is possible for a democracy to fight a war without portraying the enemy as evil and transforming the war into a crusade? Are democratic leaders at war more likely to use rhetoric that emphasizes the righteousness of their cause? Compare total wars, such as the Civil War and World Wars I and II, with limited wars such as the Spanish-American War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War. Is the rhetoric different?



Reprinted from *War Without Mercy*.

As the two sketches above illustrate, the Japanese were generally portrayed as evil, if not subhuman, in the American media during World War II.