The Decision to Drop The Bomb

Grade Level: 9-10 (U.S. History)

Created By: Ryan Newell
Canton McKinley Senior High School
Canton City Schools

Duration
2-days (90 minute blocks)

Image Courtesy of the Truman Library, National Archives and Records Administration

Overview

• In this lesson students will analyze the decision of President Harry Truman to use the Atomic Bomb to end World War II
• Using Primary Sources, students will decide in a persuasive essay whether Truman made the correct decision to end World War II by dropping the Atomic Bomb(s)
• (Lesson assumes students are familiar with the dropping of the Atomic Bomb)

The New Ohio Academic Content Standards

• The United States mobilization of its economic and military resources during World War II brought significant changes to American society.
• Use of atomic weapons changed the nature of war, altered the balance of power and began the nuclear age.

Historical Background

In April of 1945 President Franklin D. Roosevelt passed away, and Vice-President Harry S. Truman became President of the United States. The war in Europe was all but over. Hitler would be dead in a matter of days, and Germany would ultimately surrender in May. However, things in the Pacific were much different. The Japanese were slowly being pushed back towards
the Japanese home islands, but at great expense of American lives and material. American B-29 bombers conducted daily raids on Japanese cities, including destructive incendiary raids, yet the Japanese still resisted. The Japanese had become desperate as the Americans approached their nation. Pilots had resorted to *kamikaze* attacks on U.S. troops and ships, crashing their planes in suicide runs into ships killing many U.S. military personal and destroying large amounts of equipment.

In early summer of 1945, Truman was made aware of a secret project codenamed “Manhattan Project.” The Manhattan Project was a bomb of enormous destructive power. Only five of these bombs had been constructed by the end of the war. The first one was detonated in New Mexico in July of 1945. The test was a success. On August 6, 1945 the B-29 *Enola Gay* dropped the atomic bomb codenamed “Little Boy” on Hiroshima Japan. 80,000 people were killed instantly. Two days later, the B-29 *Bockscar* dropped the second bomb “Fat Man” on the city of Nagasaki. 40,000 more people were killed. Japan would ultimately surrender on August 15, 1945 (V-J Day).

The dropping of the atomic bombs forever changed the world. After the abrupt end of the Second World War, the United States emerged as the world’s only superpower. Four years later The Soviet Union would successfully detonate an atomic weapon sparking a decades long arms race and political competition between the capitalistic/democratic United States and the Communist Soviet Union.

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**Enduring Understandings/ Essential Questions**

- New weapons can change the nature of war, and alter the balance of power.
- How do new technologies affect the world?

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**Instructional Strategies**

Day 1:

Part 1: Bell Ringer work. Ask students to answer the following prompt in a quickwrite: **Does a nation have the right to attack civilians (noncombatants, women, children)?**

Part 2: Students will begin the activity by familiarizing themselves with the five basic options Truman faced to end World War II. Students should be broken into mixed ability pairs. Once in pairs they will be given the reading “The Decision to Drop The Bomb” (Appendix A). In their groups students will read the five options Truman had to end the war and identify positives and negatives of each option on the provided worksheet (Appendix B). Review upon completion.

Part 3: While still in their groups, students will be given three primary sources. One letter advocating the use of atomic weapons to end the war (Appendix C), one letter criticizing the use of Atomic weapons to end the war (Appendix D), and a copy of casualty predictions prepared by General MacArthur for President Truman for Operation Olympic (Appendix E) Students will use a provided primary source analysis paper (Appendix F) to assist them with the letters, and a question sheet and description for the Casualty predition note (Appendix E).

Part 3: At the bottom of the Decision Analysis sheet (Appendix B) have students Answer the following prompt in a quick write format: Did Truman make the right decision in using the Atomic Bomb to end World War II? Why or why not?
Day 2:

Redistribute Decision Analysis sheet (Appendix B) from previous day. Direct students to revisit their quick write. Tell students that today they will be writing an essay defending their beliefs about Truman’s decision. Pass out essay instruction guide (Appendix F), and essay rubric (Appendix G). Review both assignment and rubric with class.

Classroom Materials

Classroom materials needed for this lesson are copies of needed work sheets and readings for each student

Resources

**Memorandum from Arthur B. Compton to the Secretary of War**

**Memorandum by J. R. Oppenheimer, "Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Weapons," June 16, 1945**

**Document Analysis worksheet**


The National Security Archive, George Washington University, [www.nsaarchive.org](http://www.nsaarchive.org)
Summative Assessment (or Question)
Collins Type III (or district equivalent) extended essay

See Appendix F

Assessment Rubric
  • See Appendix G

Appendices
Appendix A – Decision to drop The Bomb Reading
Appendix B – Decision Analysis sheet
Appendix C - Memorandum by J. R. Oppenheimer, "Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Weapons," June 16, 1945
Appendix D- Memorandum from Arthur B. Compton to the Secretary of War
Appendix E – Operation Olympic Casualty predictions
Appendix F – Document Analysis Worksheet
Appendix G - Essay writing assignment
Appendix H – Essay rubric
Appendix A: Decision to drop The Bomb Reading

The Decision to Drop the Bomb

In April of 1945 President Franklin D. Roosevelt passed away, and Vice-President Harry S. Truman became President of the United States. The war in Europe was all but over. Hitler would be dead in a matter of days, and Germany would ultimately surrender in May. However, things in the Pacific were much different. The Japanese were slowly being pushed back towards the Japanese home islands, but at great expense of American lives and material. American B-29 bombers conducted daily raids on Japanese cities, including destructive incendiary raids, yet the Japanese still resisted. The Japanese had become desperate as the Americans approached their nation. Pilots had resorted to kamikaze attacks on U.S. troops and ships, crashing their planes in suicide runs into ships killing many U.S. military personal and destroying large amounts of equipment.

In early summer of 1945, Truman was made aware of a secret project codenamed “Manhattan Project.” The Manhattan Project was a bomb of enormous destructive power. Only five of these bombs had been constructed by the end of the war. The first one was detonated in New Mexico in July of 1945. The test was a success. On August 6, 1945 the B-29 Enola Gay dropped the atomic bomb codenamed “Little Boy” on Hiroshima Japan. 80,000 people were killed instantly. Two days later, the B-29 Bockscar dropped the second bomb “Fat Man” on the city of Nagasaki. 40,000 more people were killed. Japan would ultimately surrender on August 15, 1945 (V-J Day).

The decision to use the Atomic Bomb was not arrived at easily by Truman. While it might have been a super weapon to quickly end the war, Truman felt its use could bring huge consequences. Ultimately Truman elected to drop the bomb(s), but he had considered five options prior to his decision.

Option 1: U.S. invasion of Japanese home islands. Most military planners were convinced the only way to end the war with Japan was an invasion of the home islands. However, the stakes would be high. Casualties to American soldiers were predicted to exceed 500,000 troops, more than had been lost in the entire war to date. Planners also feared the Japanese “Bushido Code” or the idea that everyone will fight to the death to protect their homeland. American troops were to storm beaches around the nation and sweep inland, taking cities and towns along the way. American and Japanese (both military and civilian) casualties would be high.

Option 2: Soviet Union would declare war on Japan. Stalin had promised Roosevelt, and later Truman, that the Soviet Union would declare war on Japan after Germany had been defeated. Until this time the USSR was neutral in the Pacific conflict. Truman considered this option greatly. The entrance of Soviet troops would lessen the burden on U.S. troops. The invasion of Japan would still have to be carried out, but Japan could be invaded from both coasts, and possibly end sooner. However, the U.S. did not support Communism. Truman and Stalin were already at odds on how Germany should be divided. The U.S. had fought the Japanese for four long years, and the Soviet Union would gain valuable land and resources after only fighting for a few months. Truman did not want any more chances for communism to spread, and possible resistance to democratic influence around the world.

Option 3: Demonstrate the bomb for the Japanese. Some suggested that Truman demonstrate the Atomic Bombs power by dropping it at sea in Tokyo harbor. The sheer power of the bomb might frighten the Japanese into surrendering without using it on the civilian
population. However, there were only five bombs. One was used as the test in New Mexico. There was no guarantee that the others would work. What would happen if the demonstration proved a failure after a public boast by the United States of a super weapon? Many feared that the U.S. might appear desperate to end the war and give the Japanese new motivation to fight on.

**Option 4: Negotiate a Peace Treaty.** Many around the world were weary of war. While it was obvious the Japanese were going to lose, the price to bring about their defeat would be high. The Japanese military was prepared to fight to its destruction. If a peace treaty could be signed between the U.S. and Japan many American and Japanese lives could be saved. However, Japan would still be in control of most of the Pacific. The American island hopping strategy had left many island and people under the brutal rule of Japan. Ultimate victory and surrender was the only way to guarantee these lands would be evacuated by Japan. It was also the only way to remove the brutal militaristic government in Japan.

**Option 5: Use the bomb to force an immediate end to the war.** The option that Truman ultimately settled on was to use the bombs’ destructive force. The thought was by destroying Japanese cities, the U.S. could intimidate Japan into an immediate surrender. Cities were selected for their military importance, but all targets contained large civilian populations, which would be accepted casualties. If the bomb failed to work, the U.S. would save global embarrassment since the weapon was a secret. The option would negate the planned invasion of Japan, and save hundreds of thousands of American soldiers’ lives. Using the bomb could also give the United States an upper hand in Europe in dealing with the Soviet Union. Stalin might be intimidated and give in to more U.S. demands.
## Decision Analysis worksheet

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Did Truman make the right decision in using the Atomic Bomb to end World War II? Why or why not?
APPENDIX C: "Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Weapons"

RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE IMMEDIATE USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

A. H. Compton
E. O. Lawrence
J. R. Oppenheimer
E. Fermi

J. R. Oppenheimer
For the Panel

June 16, 1945

These materials are reproduced from www.nsarchive.org with the permission of the National Security Archive
You have asked us to comment on the initial use of the new weapon. This use, in our opinion, should be such as to promote a satisfactory adjustment of our international relations. At the same time, we recognize our obligation to our nation to use the weapons to help save American lives in the Japanese war.

(1) To accomplish these ends we recommend that before the weapons are used not only Britain, but also Russia, France, and China be advised that we have made considerable progress in our work on atomic weapons, that these may be ready to use during the present war, and that we would welcome suggestions as to how we can cooperate in making this development contribute to improved international relations.

(2) The opinions of our scientific colleagues on the initial use of these weapons are not unanimous; they range from the proposal of a purely technical demonstration to that of the military application best designed to induce surrender. Those who advocate a purely technical demonstration would wish to outlaw the use of atomic weapons, and have feared that if we use the weapons now our position in future negotiations will be prejudiced. Others emphasize the opportunity of saving American lives by immediate military use, and believe that such use will improve the international prospects, in that they are more concerned with the prevention of war than with the elimination of this specific weapon. We find ourselves closer to these latter views; we can propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use.

(3) With regard to those general aspects of the use of atomic energy, it is clear that we, as scientific men, have no proprietary rights. It is true that we are among the few citizens who have had occasion to give thoughtful consideration to these problems during the past few years. We have, however, no claim to special competence in solving the political, social, and military problems which are presented by the advent of atomic power.
Appendix D: Memorandum from Arthur B. Compton to the Secretary of War

Summary

The development of nuclear power not only constitutes an important addition to the technological and military power of the United States, but also creates grave political and economic problems for the future of this country.

Nuclear bombs cannot possibly remain a "secret weapon" at the exclusive disposal of this country, for more than a few years. The scientific facts on which their construction is based are well known to scientists of other countries. Unless an effective international control of nuclear explosives is instituted, a race of nuclear armaments is certain to ensue following the first revelation of our possession of nuclear weapons to the world. Within ten years other countries may have nuclear bombs, each of which, weighing less than a ton, could destroy an urban area of more than five square miles. In the war to which such an armaments race is likely to lead, the United States, with its agglomeration of population and industry in comparatively few metropolitan districts, will be at a disadvantage compared to the nations whose population and industry are scattered over large areas.

We believe that these considerations make the use of nuclear bombs for an early, unannounced attack against Japan inadvisable. If the United States would be the first to release this new means of indiscriminate destruction upon mankind, she would sacrifice public support throughout the world, precipitate the race of armaments, and prejudice the possibility of reaching an international agreement on the future control of such weapons.

Much more favorable conditions for the eventual achievement of such an agreement could be created if nuclear bombs were first revealed to the world by a demonstration in an appropriately selected uninhabited area.

If chances for the establishment of an effective international control of nuclear weapons will have to be considered slight at the present time, then not only the use of these weapons against Japan, but even their early demonstration...
may be contrary to the interests of this country. A postponement of such a demonstration will have in this case the advantage of delaying the beginning of the nuclear armaments race as long as possible. If, during the time gained, ample support could be made available for further development of the field in this country, the postponement would substantially increase the lead which we have established during the present war, and our position in an armament race or in any later attempt at international agreement will thus be strengthened.

On the other hand, if no adequate public support for the development of nucleonics will be available without a demonstration, the postponement of the latter may be deemed inadvisable, because enough information might leak out to cause other nations to start the armament race, in which we will then be at a disadvantage. At the same time, the distrust of other nations may be aroused by a confirmed development under cover of secrecy, making it more difficult eventually to reach an agreement with them.

If the government should decide in favor of an early demonstration of nuclear weapons it will then have the possibility to take into account the public opinion of this country and of the other nations before deciding whether these weapons should be used in the war against Japan. In this way, other nations may assume a share of responsibility for such a fateful decision.

To sum up, we urge that the use of nuclear bombs in this war be considered as a problem of long-range national policy rather than military expediency, and that this policy be directed primarily to the achievement of an agreement permitting an effective international control of the means of nuclear warfare.

The vital importance of such a control for our country is obvious from the fact that the only effective alternative method of protecting this country, which we are aware, would be a dispersal of our major cities and essential industries.
Appendix E: Casualty Estimate for Operation Olympic, June 17, 1945

http://www.macarthurmemorial.org/e_primary_resources.asp.

Background Information:

By 1945, it was clear that the Allies were going to win the war in Europe and the Pacific. In May 1945 Nazi Germany surrendered, and in the Pacific Theatre, military leaders including General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz were planning the invasion of the Japanese mainland. This invasion was code named Operation Downfall and consisted of many different phases.

As planning progressed, President Truman received casualty estimates for Operation Downfall and its smaller phases like Operation Olympic. In the wake of the fierce fighting at Okinawa and Iwo Jima, it was clear that the Japanese would resist surrender – even when faced with no alternative. On Okinawa and Iwo Jima, tens of thousands of Japanese soldiers had chosen to fight to the death or to become suicide bombers rather than surrender.

Faced with an enemy that was unlikely to surrender, even in the face of defeat, military planners estimated that ending the war through Operation Olympic would result in millions of casualties. These casualties included American servicemen, Japanese servicemen, and Japanese civilians. Armed with this information, President Truman would make the most difficult decision of his presidency.

* Note: D to D-30: 50,800 means that in the first 30 days of Operation Olympic, it is estimated that 50,800 American troops will be killed or wounded. Background Information Primary Document #6

Text courtesy of the MacArthur Memorial Education Programs, http://www.macarthurmemorial.org
Primary Document #6

Casualty Estimate for Operation Olympic, June 17, 1945

TOP SECRET

PRIORITY

FROM: CINCPAC

TO: WARCOS

G-1 17 JUNE 1945

Estimate of OLYMPIC battle casualties for planning purposes (O-19571)
Reprad W-17477 as follows:

D to D-30: 50,800
D-30 to D-60: 27,150
D-60 to D-90: 27,100

The foregoing are estimated total battle casualties from which estimated return to duty numbers are deducted. Not included in the foregoing are non-battle casualties which are estimated at 4200 for each 30 day period.

* Note: D to D-30: 50,800 means that in the first 30 days of Operation Olympic, it is estimated that 50,800 American troops will be killed or wounded.
Appendix E: Casualty Estimate for Operation Olympic, June 17, 1945

Primary Source Analysis:

1. Can you explain what this memo regarding Operation Olympic details? Why would this information be classified as TOP SECRET?

2. How did the United States think an invasion of Japan would unfold? Approximately how many casualties are estimated for Operation Olympic?

3. Operation Olympic was just one phase of the proposed Allied invasion of Japan – named Operation Downfall. Do you think planners expected more or less casualties for Operation Downfall as a whole?

4. The United States did not invade Japan. How did the United States end the War with Japan?

5. Do you think memos such as this one would have influenced President Truman in his decision to drop the atomic bombs? Why?

Appendix F: Document Analysis Worksheet

Written Document Analysis Worksheet

1. TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):
   - __ Newspaper
   - ___ Map
   - ___ Advertisement
   - ___ Letter
   - ___ Telegram
   - ___ Congressional record
   - ___ Patent
   - ___ Press release
   - ___ Census report
   - ___ Memorandum
   - ___ Report
   - ___ Other

2. UNIQUE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):
   - ___ Interesting letterhead
   - ___ Handwritten
   - ___ Typed
   - ___ Notations
   - ___ Seals
   - ___ "RECEIVED" stamp
   - ___ Other

3. DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:

4. AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:

5. POSITION (TITLE):

6. FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?

7. DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)

A. List three things the author said that you think are important:

B. Why do you think this document was written?

C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:

E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:

Courtesy of the Education Staff, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC 20408.
Appendix G: Essay Writing Assignment

Persuasive Essay

**Background:** President Truman’s decision to use the Atomic bomb(s) on Japan brought America’s bloodiest foreign conflict to an immediate end. By utilizing the new super weapon Truman was able to shorten the war months, perhaps years, and save countless American (and some say Japanese) lives. However, use of atomic weapons introduced the world to a new age where large cities could be destroyed by a single bomber. The world would soon enter an era of arms stockpiling and political maneuvering. This scenarios have caused many historians to ask, Did Truman make the right decision to drop the bomb?”

**Assignment:** You are to write a persuasive paper that answers the question:

“Did President Truman make the right decision to drop the Atomic bomb to end World War II?”

You may choose either side. Your paper must include the following:

Accurate historical facts

At least THREE references to primary sources

An intro and a conclusion

**Purpose:** To persuade

**Audience:** Teachers, Historians
Appendix H: Essay Rubric

**Persuasive Essay: Should Truman have dropped The Bomb?**

**Teacher Name:**

**Student Name:** ________________________________

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<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>4 - Above Standards</th>
<th>3 - Meets Standards</th>
<th>2 - Approaching Standards</th>
<th>1 - Below Standards</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tr>
<td>Support for Position</td>
<td>Includes 3 or more pieces of evidence (from Primary sources) that support the position statement. The writer anticipates the reader's concerns, biases or arguments and has provided at least 1 counter-argument.</td>
<td>Includes 3 or more pieces of evidence (from primary sources) that support the position statement.</td>
<td>Includes 2 pieces of evidence (from primary sources) that support the position statement.</td>
<td>Includes 1 or fewer pieces of evidence (from primary sources).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>All sources used for quotes, statistics and facts are credible and cited correctly.</td>
<td>All sources used for quotes, statistics and facts are credible and most are cited correctly.</td>
<td>Most sources used for quotes, statistics and facts are credible and cited correctly.</td>
<td>Many sources are suspect (not credible) AND/OR are not cited correctly.</td>
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<td>Position Statement</td>
<td>The position statement provides a clear, strong statement of the author's position on the topic.</td>
<td>The position statement provides a clear statement of the author's position on the topic.</td>
<td>A position statement is present, but does not make the author's position clear.</td>
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<td>Accuracy</td>
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