

Attachment D: The Atomic Bomb Decision

Did the United States have no choice but to drop the bomb?

- The few decision makers who knew about the Manhattan Project always assumed that the atomic bomb would be used against Germany or Japan. Some, like Major General Groves, who was the head of the project, thought it could be decisive in ending the war.
- Harry S. Truman, who was sworn in as President after Roosevelt's death, had no knowledge of the atomic bomb. He was in office fewer than three months when he was confronted with the decision of whether to use the bomb or not. He saw the atomic bomb principally as a means to end the war quickly and save American lives.
- In Japan, a peace faction in the military-dominated Japanese government had begun to realize that a way had to be found to negotiate an end to the war. However, the Allied demand for "unconditional surrender" was regarded as unacceptable.
- While many Americans hated Emperor Hirohito, Undersecretary of State Joseph Grew nonetheless argued that the Japanese might surrender if allowed to retain their Emperor. He also asserted that the Emperor would be "the sole stabilizing force" capable of making the Japanese armed forces accept a surrender order. Truman ultimately did not accept Grew's advice because he foresaw much resistance to modifying the Allied policy.
- Tensions grew between the Soviet Union and the United States, especially in terms of Soviet domination of Poland and other Eastern European countries (Spring 1945). Secretary of War Stimson hoped that American possession of the atomic bomb might help make the Soviets "play ball" in Europe and elsewhere.
- Some Manhattan Project scientists felt that the bomb project had been a response to a threat from Germany. Attacking Japan without first providing a warning and an opportunity to surrender, they felt, would weaken, "our moral position...in the eyes of the world." They also were concerned that without telling the Soviets first, the use of the bomb would increase the chances of an uncontrolled nuclear arms race. These concerns did not reach Truman because all the scientists' messages were blocked by Secretary of State Byrnes, Major General Groves, and others.
- The decision to drop the bomb was made in an effort to save American lives. Estimates of the number of American casualties that the planned invasion of Japan would have cost varied widely. One estimate set the number at 31,000, while other estimates were more proportional to the losses at Okinawa. Truman was concerned that a Japanese invasion would result in another Okinawa. Added to the American losses would be many Japanese casualties, both military and civilian. To prevent an invasion and to save as many lives as possible, Truman chose to use the atomic bomb.
- Based on information available after the war, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey concluded in 1946 that, "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 has been planned or contemplated.” The United States naval blockade was strangling Japan, which depended totally on imported fuel, while conventional bombing was destroying its infrastructure. Stimson and other post-war observers, however, doubted that Japan’s rulers would have accepted unconditional surrender if the home islands had not been invaded or if the atomic bomb had not been dropped.