

## EPILOGUE: THE DECISION AND THE CONSEQUENCES

On Tuesday, July 24, 1945, President Truman was in Potsdam, Germany, meeting with Soviet leader Josef Stalin, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Chinese President Jiang Jieshi. The purpose of the conference was to plan for governing postwar Germany and to discuss Soviet participation in ending the war in Asia. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, President Roosevelt had greeted with enthusiasm Stalin's pledge that Soviet troops would enter the war against Japan within three months of the surrender of Germany. The successful testing of an atomic bomb on July 16, however, had changed the equation. Soviet help in ending the war was not as important in the eyes of U.S. officials. In fact, many believed that the risks of Soviet expansion into northern China outweighed the added pressure the Soviets would exert on Japan.

Late on the evening of July 24, Truman approved a directive prepared by General Leslie Groves authorizing the 509 Composite Group to begin dropping atomic bombs on Japanese cities after August 3. Army Chief of Staff George Marshall and Secretary of War Henry Stimson concurred with the decision. Two days later, at the close of the Potsdam Conference, Truman, Churchill, and Jiang issued a joint ultimatum demanding that the Japanese government surrender unconditionally. The atomic bomb was not explicitly mentioned nor was its power described in that document.

### **Why did Japanese leaders respond as they did to the ultimatum?**

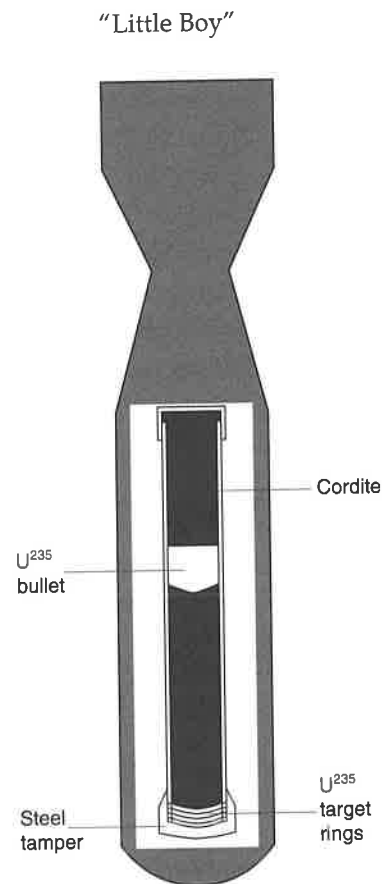
Japanese leaders, meeting in secret on July 27, debated the meaning of the Allied ultimatum and the course they should follow. Some argued for delay until the Soviet Union, which was still neutral, responded to their request for assistance in negotiating an end to the war. The majority, however, contended that national morale would suffer if the ultimatum were not rejected immediately. They held out hope that Japan would be able to inflict so many casualties on an American invasion force that the United States would be willing to negotiate an end to the war that

would not require Japan's unconditional surrender. The next day, Japanese Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki told reporters, "The Government does not find any important value in it [the ultimatum], and there is no other recourse but to ignore it entirely and resolutely fight for the successful conclusion of the war."

Just before 3 A.M. on August 6, a B-29 superfortress bomber named *Enola Gay* took off from the Pacific island of Tinian carrying the five-ton "Little Boy." The flight's destination was Hiroshima, a medium-sized city on the southern part of the largest Japanese island, Honshu. Hiroshima had been kept off General LeMay's list of cities to be firebombed and saved as a possible target for an atomic bomb.

### **What effect did the bomb have on Hiroshima?**

Within six hours, Colonel Paul Tibbets had piloted the *Enola Gay* over Hiroshima. The American crew had not encountered a single Japanese plane nor run into fire from anti-aircraft defenses on the ground. As the B-29 approached the center of Hiroshima, flying nearly six miles above the city, "Little Boy" was dropped. The radar on the atomic bomb was set to detonate the device 1,900 feet above ground level to



maximize the effects of the blast. A member of the *Enola Gay* crew reported that a spectacular mushroom cloud soared into the sky when the bomb exploded. He described the sight as a burning, red core surrounded by a bubbling mass of purple-grey smoke.

"Little Boy" struck Hiroshima with an explosive force of 12,500 tons of TNT. At the time, the city was home to approximately 280,000 civilians and 43,000 soldiers. Approximately 100,000 of them died immediately or suffered injuries that killed them within a few months of the attack. As in the firebombings of Hamburg, Dresden, and Tokyo, intense heat transformed thousands of people into small, charred lumps of flesh.

*"I felt as though I had been struck on the back with something like a big hammer, and thrown into boiling oil....The vicinity was in pitch darkness; from the depths of the gloom, bright red flames rise crackling, and spread moment by moment. The faces of my friends who just before were working energetically are now burned and blistered, their clothes torn to rags."*

– Hiroshima college student

*"The appearance of people was...well, they all had skin blackened by burns....They had no hair because their hair was burned, and at a glance you couldn't tell whether you were looking at them from in front or in back....Their skin not only on their hands, but on their faces and bodies too hung down."*

– Hiroshima grocer

In addition, the radiation burns and internal damage caused by gamma rays produced lethal injuries to people as far as two miles from the center of the blast. The death rate (the number of deaths as a proportion of the total population) in Hiroshima was nearly five times higher than the death rate resulting from the March firebombing of Tokyo. In addition, forty-eight thousand of Hiroshima's seventy-six thousand buildings were totally destroyed by the atomic bomb, while another twenty-two thousand were seriously damaged.

### **How did U.S. policy-makers and soldiers respond to the dropping of the bomb?**

News of the bombing was greeted as a success in Washington. The White House issued a press release on August 6 calling the atomic bomb "the greatest achievement of organized science in history." Hours after the detonation, General Groves informed Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Los Alamos team, that the atomic bomb had worked.

"I'm very proud of you and all of your people," Groves told Oppenheimer by telephone. The general noted that the bomb had gone off "with a tremendous bang." Oppenheimer seemed satisfied. "Everyone is feeling reasonably good about it," he said, "and I extend my heartiest congratulations. It's been a long road." That evening, Oppenheimer was greeted with cheers and whistles when he announced the news to the Los Alamos group. Likewise, most Americans were thankful that the end of World War II was clearly in sight.

*"When the bombs dropped and news began to circulate that [the invasion of Japan] would not, after all, take place, that we would not be obliged to run up the beaches near Tokyo assault-firing while being mortared and shelled...we cried with relief and joy. We were going to live. We were going to grow up to adulthood after all."*

– 21-year-old U.S. soldier

*"Thank God the war is over and I don't have to get shot at any more. I can go home."*

– *Enola Gay* crew member

### **How did the war finally end?**

After the attack on Hiroshima, the Japanese government did not immediately respond to the U.S. call for unconditional surrender. On August 8, Josef Stalin announced that the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan the following day, thereby fulfilling the pledge he made in February 1945.

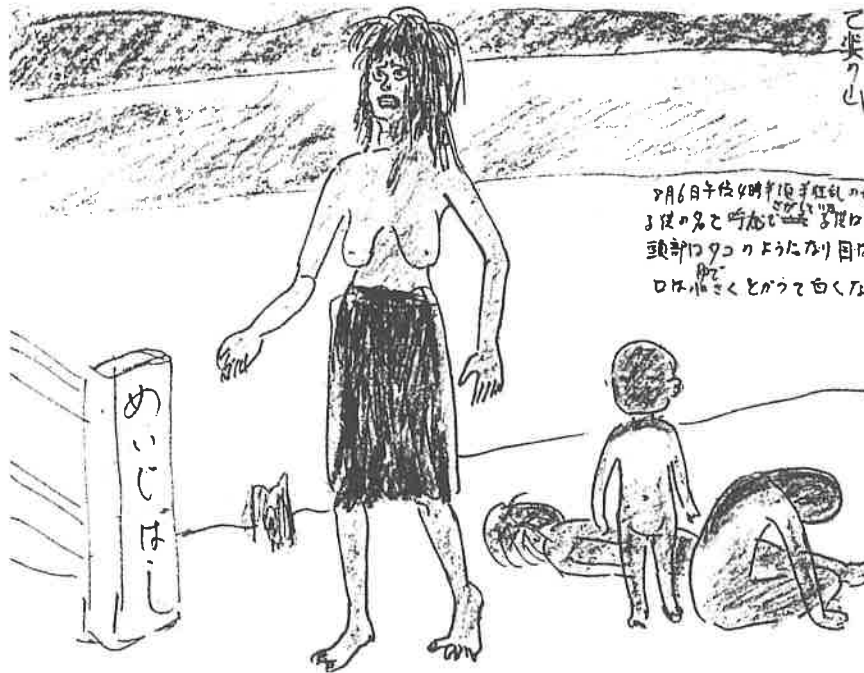
The Hiroshima explosion left the United States with one atomic bomb, "Fat Man," which was fueled by plutonium. Where and when it would be dropped

was entirely a military decision. Truman's directive of July 24 had authorized the use of atomic bombs against Japanese cities. The president was not involved in selecting the targets or the dates.

For the second atomic bomb attack, U.S. military officials chose Nagasaki, a seaport on the southern island of Kyushu. Unlike the inhabitants of Hiroshima, the people of Nagasaki were warned of the possibility of an atomic attack in leaflets dropped by U.S. aircraft. The warnings, however, were largely ignored because the Japanese government had not released news about the devastation of Hiroshima. On August 9, "Fat Man" exploded over Nagasaki with a force of twenty-two thousand tons of TNT. Roughly seventy thousand people were killed.

On August 10, the Japanese offered to surrender on the condition that the position of the Japanese emperor not be compromised. U.S. leaders responded that Japan would have to accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration. Meanwhile, the Los Alamos team informed the president that a third bomb, fueled by plutonium, would be ready for delivery shortly after August 17. The scientists assumed that the plutonium being produced at Hanford, Washington, would provide a reliable fuel supply for additional bombs.

President Truman ordered continued bombing of Japanese cities using conventional explosives. On the night of August 14, 828 B-29s bombed Tokyo in one of the largest air raids of the war. That same day,



The sketches above, drawn by survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, illustrate the results of the attack.

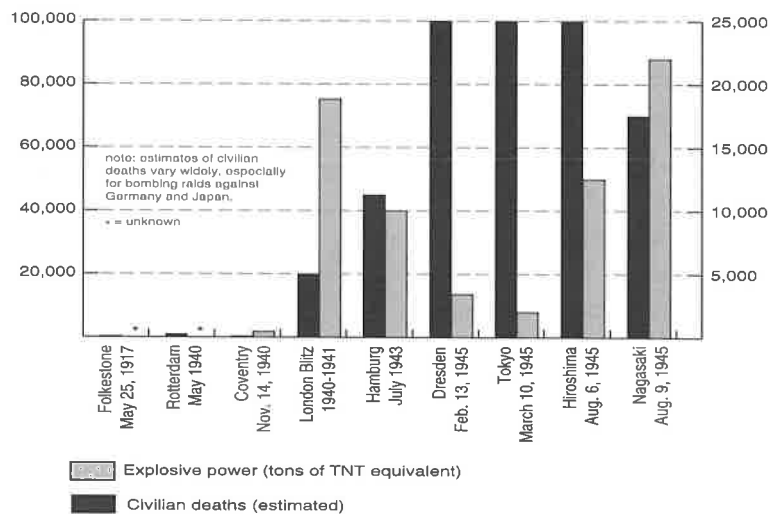
Japan's leaders indicated that they were willing to accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration and surrender unconditionally. World War II was over.

## 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.*