

Decision A: Whether to Build an Atomic Bomb

In August 1939 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt received a letter from Albert Einstein, a brilliant and well-known physicist. In the letter, Einstein alerted Roosevelt that Germany might be building an atomic bomb. The following is an excerpt from Einstein's letter:

In the course of the last four months it has been made probable—through the work of Joliet in France as well as Fermi and Szilard in America—that it may be possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium [one of the minerals essential to the construction of an atomic bomb], by which large amounts of power and large quantities of a new radium-like element would be generated. Now it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future.

This new phenomenon would also lead to the construction of bombs, and it is conceivable—though much less certain—that extremely powerful bombs of a new type may thus be constructed. A single bomb of this type, carried by boat and exploded in a port, might very well destroy the whole port together with some of the surrounding territory. However, such bombs might very well prove to be too heavy for transportation by air.

I understand Germany has actually stopped the sale of uranium from Czechoslovakian mines which she has taken over.

When Einstein wrote this letter to Roosevelt, the United States was not yet at war with Germany. However, the president took immediate interest in the scientific developments described in the letter. The bomb would not only be the most powerful weapon on earth, it would transform warfare by making it possible to kill more people with less effort.

In the 18 months following Einstein's letter, members of the Roosevelt administration debated what action should be taken to counter the German threat. Some officials wondered how serious the threat really was. In addition, not all scientists agreed with Einstein. In fact, two Nobel Prize-winning nuclear physicists, Enrico Fermi and Niels Bohr, believed that the construction of an atomic bomb was a practical improbability.

Critical-Thinking Question A: You are an advisor to President Roosevelt. Which of the following do you advise the president to do? Be prepared to defend your answer.

- Ignore scientific developments and do not build an atomic bomb; concentrate U.S. efforts on building conventional weapons, such as faster planes and more powerful tanks.
- Vigorously pursue the construction of an atomic bomb because the United States is in a race against the Germans.
- Postpone the development of an atomic bomb and send spies into Germany to determine the accuracy of Einstein's letter.
- Do not develop the bomb. Instead, monitor the construction of new German weapon facilities and then send American bombers to destroy them.
- Denounce the development of atomic bombs as immoral. Only evil could come from their development.

Decision B: Whether to Drop an Atomic Bomb

Vice President Harry S. Truman became president after Roosevelt unexpectedly died in April 1945. While attending an Allied conference in Potsdam, Germany, three months later, Truman received a telegram stating that the test of the atomic bomb had been successful. By this time in the war, Germany had been utterly defeated. However, Japan had vowed to fight on, despite the Allies' demand at Potsdam for an unconditional surrender. The Japanese felt that an unconditional surrender would jeopardize the position of their emperor, whom they considered divine (Godlike). In addition, the Japanese viewed surrender as dishonorable. They fought with fanatic resistance and believed it was more honorable to commit suicide than to surrender to enemy forces. In this vein, Japanese *kamikaze* pilots strapped themselves into planes loaded with explosives and crashed them into American naval vessels. They managed to destroy 53 ships and damage 158 others.

Despite these desperate attacks, the Japanese were close to defeat by July 1945. Three factors were working against them. First, Allied bombing runs over the Japanese home islands were killing tens of thousands of civilians and military personnel. Second, an Allied naval blockade made it impossible for Japan to import the goods necessary to continue fighting and prevented one million Japanese troops in China from returning to their homeland. Third, the massive Soviet Red Army was poised to enter the war and assist the United States.

The United States had hoped to end the Pacific War by invading the home islands of Japan. However, in the face of Japanese fanaticism, Truman was deeply concerned that such an invasion would cost tens of thousands of American lives. In light of this concern, some of Truman's advisors recommended that he end the war quickly by dropping a bomb without warning on a large Japanese city. The undersecretary of the navy, Ralph Bard, disagreed and told Truman that dropping the bomb without a specific warning would jeopardize "the position of the United States as a great humanitarian nation." A group of scientists from the bomb project suggested that the United States drop the bomb in a remote, unpopulated location to show the bomb's power and convince Japan to surrender.

Critical-Thinking Question B: You are a close advisor to President Truman. Which of the following do you advise the president to do? Be prepared to defend your answer.

- A. Without warning, drop an atomic bomb on a Japanese city as soon as possible.
- B. Drop the bomb on an unpopulated area to demonstrate its destructive capabilities.
- C. Warn the Japanese that the United States possesses atomic weapons and is willing to use them if they don't surrender in a specified time. If they don't surrender, then drop the bomb.
- D. Reject the use of atomic weapons, and continue the naval blockade and conventional bombing. If the measures do not produce a Japanese surrender, invade Japan.
- E. Reject the use of atomic weapons and negotiate an end to World War II, allowing the Japanese to surrender with their emperor as a part of the postwar government.

Decision C: Whether Truman Made the Right Decision

Immediately following the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Japan, the majority of Americans felt the right decision had been made. Surveys conducted by *Fortune* magazine in the fall of 1945 revealed that over 50 percent of Americans believed that the United States “should have used the two bombs on cities just as we did.” Another 22.7 percent felt the United States “should have quickly used many more [bombs] before Japan had the chance to surrender.” American soldiers also supported Truman’s decision. One young soldier stated: “When the bombs were dropped and news began to circulate that [the invasion of Japan] would not take place after all, 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.”

Many officials in the top ranks of the military and government supported Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bombs. However, others expressed doubts. Admiral William D. Leahy stated: “It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons.... My own feeling was that being the first to use [the atomic bomb], we adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages.” Dwight D. Eisenhower, a general with enormous prestige, expressed the hope that the United States would never have to use such a weapon against an enemy again because he disliked seeing the country “initiate the use of anything so horrible and destructive.”

Some historians have severely criticized Truman’s decision. They argue that the Japanese were already defeated in August 1945, and that the atomic bombs were used primarily as a warning to the Soviet Union. Although they were allies during World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union had very different visions for the postwar world. The Soviets wanted to maintain control over Eastern Europe. The United States wanted the Soviets to provide independence to eastern European countries. Historians critical of Truman’s decision argue that he authorized the use of the atomic bombs mainly to scare the Soviets out of Eastern Europe and to keep them from gaining more territory in Asia. To these historians, the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were sacrificed in a high-stakes poker game between two superpowers. They also argue that the postwar nuclear arms race can be traced back to the fear and mistrust created by Truman’s decision. Other historians counter that the military pressures Truman was under at the end of World War II played a much more important role in his decision than the threat of Soviet aggression.

Critical-Thinking Question C: Truman’s decision to use atomic weapons against Japan is one of the most controversial in history. In retrospect, do you think Truman made the right decision in authorizing the use of atomic weapons? Be prepared to defend your answer.

- A. Truman did not make the right decision when he authorized the use of atomic weapons
- B. Truman made the right decision when he authorized the use of atomic weapons.

Name:

Date:

Assessing the Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

Complete the following chart:

PROS FOR USING ATOMIC BOMB	CONS FOR USING ATOMIC BOMB

Answer the following questions:

1. Was the decision to drop the bomb a military necessity? If not, was it justifiable for a reason besides military necessity?
2. Why do you think that atomic weapons have not been used since WWII? What is the likelihood that they may be used in the future?