

Classroom Version of Primary Source Activity – Truman and the Atomic Bomb

1. Overview

For more than 60 years, historians have debated President Truman's decision to drop atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. In this exercise, students will examine letters and diary entries written by Truman, an interview with Truman, a White House press release, and contemporary newspaper articles that cast light on Truman's thinking at the time and his decision making process. Teachers will also analyze excerpts from a Truman administration advisory committee report that recommended dropping the atomic bombs and a report from the U.S. military issued shortly after the war that casts doubt on the necessity of using the atomic bomb to defeat Japan. Students will use these primary sources to address the following questions: Why did President Truman decide to use atomic bombs on Japan? How did Truman reach this decision? Was the use of the atomic bomb necessary to defeat the Japanese in 1945? How did the Truman administration shape the documents for different audiences? After analyzing the primary sources and learning more about the historical context, teachers will debate Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb.

2. Source Analysis, Part 1

- a. Distribute copies of the *letter from Secretary of War Stimson* to Truman, excerpts from the *minutes of the Interim Committee* (21 June 1945), excerpts from Truman's *Potsdam Diary*, and the *memo from General Handy* to General Spaatz authorizing atomic strikes on specified Japanese targets.
- b. Ask students to work in pairs to analyze the primary sources, writing down observations and questions.

3. Group Discussion, Part 1

Write three columns on the board: Notice, Questions and Historical Background. Use the following questions to guide the discussion:

What did you notice about each document? What surprised you? What questions do you want to ask about the documents, the context or the historical background?

What do you know about the Manhattan Project, the development of the atomic bomb, and the historical period that led up to the atomic strikes on Japan? How much did Truman know about the Manhattan Project before he became president? What was the Interim Committee and what impact did its recommendations have on Truman? What was Truman's mindset about Japan and the Soviet Union during the Potsdam Conference and how did this affect his decision to approve use of the atomic bombs? How much debate occurred among Truman's advisors before the decision was reached to use the atomic bombs?

4. **Historical Background**

Present this historical background to enhance the group's knowledge of the time period and as a basis for drawing conclusions in the group discussions.

Truman

Truman took office as president upon the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) on April 12, 1945. At that time, Truman had no knowledge of the Manhattan Project and the development of the atomic bomb; he was never been briefed on the project by FDR. Truman was fully briefed on the Manhattan Project at the end of April 1945 by Secretary of War Henry Stimson. In preparation for Truman's meeting with Churchill and Stalin at Potsdam, Truman appointed a high level group of officials called the Interim Committee to advise him on all issues related to the atomic bomb.

The Potsdam Conference

In the early years of the war in the Pacific, FDR encouraged Stalin to declare war on Japan. He hoped that this would require Japanese troop commitment in Manchuria, leaving fewer Japanese troops to defend the home islands from an Allied invasion. By the spring of 1945, Soviet actions in Eastern Europe led the Truman administration to rethink its position about Soviet participation in the war against Japan. During the Potsdam Conference, Truman was informed of the successful test of the atomic bomb in New Mexico on July 16, 1945. Truman told Stalin, without elaboration, that the U.S. had a new significant weapon that he intended to use against Japan. Stalin told Truman at the conference that the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan in August. The Potsdam Declaration issued by the allied powers on July 26, 1945, threatened Japan with "prompt and utter destruction" if it did not surrender unconditionally. The declaration did not address the status of the Japanese emperor in a post-war Japan, perhaps the most critical issue to the Japanese leadership.

The Atomic Bombs

As Truman was en route home from Potsdam, he authorized the use of two atomic bombs on four potential Japanese targets – Hiroshima, Kokura, Nigata and Nagasaki – and transferred operational control over the weapons to the U.S. military. The targets were chosen, at the recommendation of the Interim Committee, because they were significant military targets surrounded by homes and other buildings that would be susceptible to damage so that the Japanese leadership could easily evaluate the devastating power of the atomic bomb.

Hiroshima was bombed on August 6, 1945. Approximately 80,000 people were killed immediately with an additional 80,000 wounded. The Soviet Union declared war on Japan on August 8. On August 9, Nagasaki was bombed after the primary target – Kokura – was discarded for weather related reasons. At Nagasaki, approximately 40,000 people were killed with an additional 40,000 wounded. Japan surrendered on August 14, 1945, after the U.S. notified the Japanese leadership that the emperor would be permitted to continue to reign, albeit under the control of allied occupation forces.

U.S. Public Opinion

Most Americans believed that Japan got what it deserved. The memory of Pearl Harbor had not faded. At the end of 1945, *Fortune* magazine published a survey showing that fewer than 20% of the American public had any moral reservations about the use of the atomic bombs, and more than 50% believed that the use of atomic weapons against Japan had been appropriate. An additional 23% of Americans indicated that they were sorry that the war ended before more atomic bombs could be used.

5. Source Analysis, Part 2

- a. Divide the students into three groups: 1) press release and news articles group; 2) letters and interview group; and 3) bombing survey group. Distribute copies of the August 6, 1945, *White House press release*, the *N.Y. Times article* dated August 7, 1945, and the *Washington Post article* dated August 7, 1945, to the press release and news article group. Distribute copies of the *interview excerpt* and *Russell, Cate, Klein*, and *Kupcinet* letters to the letters and interview group. Distribute copies of the *Bombing Survey Summary Report*, dated July 1, 1946, to the bombing survey group.
- b. Ask each group to analyze their respective documents, writing down observations and questions.

- c. Ask each group to jigsaw, sharing their documents with the other two groups.

6. **Group Discussion, Part 2**

Use the following questions to guide a group discussion: What did you notice about the documents? What surprised you? What questions do you want to ask about the documents, the context, or the historical background?

How did Truman explain his decision to drop the atomic bombs? Are there any clues that might lead you to believe that there were other considerations that led to this decision? How much of an impact did “bureaucratic momentum” have on the decision? Could Japan have been defeated without massive American casualties and without the dropping of the atomic bombs?

With respect to all of the documents you have analyzed or learned about through the jigsaw, who was the intended audience for each document? How did the intended audience for each document shape its language and message? Are these messages consistent or do they indicate that the Truman administration had several competing ideas with respect to the bombs?

7. **Culminating Activity**

Divide the students into two groups and ask them to debate the following:

Resolved: Truman’s decision to authorize the use of the atomic bombs to end the war against Japan was necessary and appropriate given the military and political considerations.