

Statement by the President announcing the use of the A-Bomb at Hiroshima

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAVID WALBERT

Statement released by President Harry S. Truman, August 6, 1945.

As you read...

Historians frequently debate whether decisions were right, or good, or necessary. One of the most frequently debated is President Harry Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan. It's also a popular topic for students to debate.

The trouble with staging these debates is that it can be very difficult to put yourself in the shoes of the person who actually had to make the decision. We now see Hiroshima as the beginning of the atomic age, the first use of a weapon whose use still threatens to destroy the world. But in 1945, Americans saw it as the end of a long, brutal, savage war.

It's clear that Truman and his advisors knew what kind of weapon they had. They had reports from the successful Trinity test, in which the first atomic bomb was exploded in the desert in New Mexico. They certainly had reports from Hiroshima. In this message to the American people that day, Truman said that "We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city."

But notice that he said *more rapidly and completely*. The United States would have bombed Japanese cities in one way or another until Japan surrendered. This map shows the damage already done to Japan's major cities, including Tokyo, through conventional bombing. Europe, too, had seen this kind of destruction. Germany had bombed London in 1940 to break British morale. The Allied Bombing of Dresden (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bombing_of_Dresden_in_World_War_II) in February 1945 had resulted in a firestorm — a fire so intense that it created its own weather system, with tornadoes of flame — that killed at least 25,000 people. And Japan had used chemical weapons in Asia earlier in the war.

If we measure the total destructive power of all the bombs used in World War II, the two atomic bombs account for only 0.6 percent. And the roughly 200,000 people killed by those two bombs were only about 0.3 percent of the total number of people killed in the war. There are two ways to look at these numbers. You can say that this was the last chapter in the most destructive war in human history. Or you can say that it's astonishing and horrifying that one in every thirty people who died in a six-year war died because of those two bombs.

Once Japan's industrial capacity had been destroyed, the next step for the United States was to invade Japan. Because Japanese soldiers had fought so fiercely on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the U.S. estimated that

anywhere from 100,000 to 250,000 American troops would be lost in an invasion — to say nothing of the deaths of Japanese soldiers and civilians. (See this oral history interview for a soldier's perspective on the planned invasion.) Having been through nearly four years of war already, very few Americans in 1945 objected to ending the war quickly by any means available.

Might Japan have surrendered without the need for an invasion, or for the atomic bomb? Was it necessary to drop a second atomic bomb just three days after the first? We'll never know. August 1945 was the end of one age of human history and the beginning of another. How you judge those events depends, in part, on which side of that divide you judge it from.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What is the tone of Truman's speech?
2. To whom did Truman give credit for the development of the atomic bomb?
3. Did Truman give any indication in this speech that he understood the dangers the world now faced because of atomic weapons?



Figure 1. Hours after an atomic bomb destroyed Hiroshima, President Harry Truman told the American people — and the world — what had happened and what it meant.

Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of T.N.T. It had more than two thousand times the blast power of the British “Grand Slam” which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare.

The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet. With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces. In their present form these bombs are now in production and even more powerful forms are in development.

It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.

Before 1939, it was the accepted belief of scientists that it was theoretically possible to release atomic energy. But no one knew any practical method of doing it. By 1942, however, we knew that the Germans were working feverishly to find a way to add atomic energy to the other engines of war with which they hoped to enslave the world. But they failed. We may be grateful to Providence that the Germans got the V-1's and V-2's late and in limited quantities and even more grateful that they did not get the atomic bomb at all.

The battle of the laboratories held fateful risks for us as well as the battles of the air, land and sea, and we have now won the battle of the laboratories as we have won the other battles.

Beginning in 1940, before Pearl Harbor, scientific knowledge useful in war was pooled between the United States and Great Britain, and many priceless helps to our victories have come from that arrangement. Under that general policy the research on the atomic bomb was begun. With American and British scientists working together we entered the race of discovery against the Germans.

The United States had available the large number of scientists of distinction in the many needed areas of knowledge. It had the tremendous industrial and financial resources necessary for the project and they could be devoted to it without undue impairment of other vital war work. In the United States the laboratory work and the production plants, on which a substantial start had already been made, would be out of reach of enemy bombing,

while at that time Britain was exposed to constant air attack and was still threatened with the possibility of invasion. For these reasons Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt agreed that it was wise to carry on the project here. We now have two great plants and many lesser works devoted to the production of atomic power. Employment during peak construction numbered 125,000 and over 65,000 individuals are even now engaged in operating the plants. Many have worked there for two and a half years. Few know what they have been producing. They see great quantities of material going in and they see nothing coming out of these plants, for the physical size of the explosive charge is exceedingly small. We have spent two billion dollars on the greatest scientific gamble in history-and won.

But the greatest marvel is not the size of the enterprise, its secrecy, nor its cost, but the achievement of scientific brains in putting together infinitely complex pieces of knowledge held by many men in different fields of science into a workable plan. And hardly less marvelous has been the capacity of industry to design, and of labor to operate, the machines and methods to do things never done before so that the brain child of many minds came forth in physical shape and performed as it was supposed to do. Both science and industry worked under the direction of the United States Army, which achieved a unique success in managing so diverse a problem in the advancement of knowledge in an amazingly short time. It is doubtful if such another combination could be got together in the world. What has been done is the greatest achievement of organized science in history. It was done under high pressure and without failure.

We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city. We shall destroy their docks, their factories, and their communications. Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan's power to make war.

It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth. Behind this air attack will follow sea and land forces in such numbers and power as they have not yet seen and with the fighting skill of which they are already well aware.

The Secretary of War, who has kept in personal touch with all phases of the project, will immediately make public a statement giving further details.

His statement will give facts concerning the sites at Oak Ridge near Knoxville, Tennessee, and at Richland near Pasco, Washington, and an installation near Santa Fe, New Mexico. Although the workers at the sites have been making materials to be used in producing the greatest destructive force in history they have not themselves been in danger beyond that of many other occupations, for the utmost care has been taken of their safety.

The fact that we can release atomic energy ushers in a new era in man's understanding of nature's forces. Atomic energy may in the future supplement the power that now comes from coal, oil, and falling water, but at present it cannot be produced on a basis to compete with them commercially. Before that comes there must be a long period of intensive research.

It has never been the habit of the scientists of this country or the policy of this Government to withhold from the world scientific knowledge. Normally, therefore, everything about the work with atomic energy would be made public.

But under present circumstances it is not intended to divulge the technical processes of production or all the military applications, pending further examination of possible methods of protecting us and the rest of the world from the danger of sudden destruction.

I shall recommend that the Congress of the United States consider promptly the establishment of an appropriate commission to control the production and use of atomic power within the United States. I shall give further consideration and make further recommendations to the Congress as to how atomic power can become a powerful and forceful influence towards the maintenance of world peace.

On the web

World War II: Pearl Harbor, Japanese internment camps, and the atomic bomb

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/WWIIPearlHarbortoAtomicBomb8.pdf>

In this lesson from the Civic Education Consortium, students will explore major events occurring at the end of World War II, including the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the forced relocation of Japanese Americans into internment camps, and America's use of atomic weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Students will explore primary sources, read poetry and a narrative, and discuss the US government's choices in depth while examining the affect on America, Japan, and the world community at large.

What should President Truman do?

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/WhatshouldTrumando.pdf>

In this lesson from the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, students will explore the various options for ending the war with Japan by simulating a meeting of President Truman's advisory committee. Students will also evaluate Truman's decision to drop two atomic bombs on Japan.

More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including Harry Truman, Japan, United States, atomic bomb, history, and military.

About the author

DAVID WALBERT

David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC's educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC's website and content management systems, and is the organization's primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.

Image credits

More information about these images and higher-resolution files are linked from the original web version of this document.

Figure 1 (page 2)

. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.