

## The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

### Introduction:

Part of my history degree at Hofstra University on Long Island, was the requirement to take a seminar during my junior year. I chose a class designed around an in-depth study of events after World War II that changed society. After some preliminary research, I chose the above title.

My research for the 18-page paper had to be from both primary and secondary sources. I was very fortunate that the university library had all of the primary sources I needed. I also bought several non-fiction and text books from the bookstore. I soon became engrossed in the subject and still continue to explore all aspects of this subject.

The paper focused on several points of view from various people involved in the Manhattan Project, Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin (through the eyes of his trusted ally Vyacheslav Molotov. Truman's personal letters to his wife Bess were the best insight as to his logic and reasoning for dropping the bomb on Japan.

I develop my own personal theory as to why he ultimately gave the commands to drop the two atomic bombs. I am not disclosing my opinion but, I will say that it is not one of the most popular reasons given.

### Instructions:

The following pages of documents cover the main aspects of the subject.

1. A one-page summary that I created covering the historical context
2. The letter written by Albert Einstein to President Roosevelt warning him of Germany's intent to build a nuclear weapon.
3. The petition of Leo Szilard and 69 co-signers warning of the dangers of the atomic bomb
4. A recreation of the leaflet dropped over Japan warning them of a second bomb after the initial destruction of Hiroshima.
5. A short, secondary source extracted from Prompt and Utter Destruction by J. Samuel Walker as to the five reasons for dropping the bomb along with three photographs.
6. A one-page extract of personal responses by Japanese people who suffered the attack.
7. A page of key questions to answer based on the above documents.

### Conclusion:

So why did Harry S. Truman decide to use the atomic bomb? Publically he has stated that it was to save lives but we will never really know what went through his mind proving that this was the real reason. Maybe the answer lies within the following documents? Maybe not?

Please continue to begin the unit: **The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb**

## **The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb**

A major turning point in modern world history took place on August 6<sup>th</sup> and August 9<sup>th</sup> in 1945 with the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was to be the major event of the final stage of World War II but it was also to become an action to commence the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

By 1939, Hitler had started several secret military projects to build what we call today “weapons of mass destruction.” His invasion of Czechoslovakia enabled him to control the uranium mines and commence his work toward nuclear weapons. On August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1939, Albert Einstein wrote to President Roosevelt warning him of Hitler’s progress and development of such weapons. Roosevelt’s response was to use the Army Corp of Engineers to start his own nuclear project and create similar weapons before the Germans and the Japanese could.

The Manhattan Project was created in May of 1942. Three main areas were secretly built to produce atomic bombs: Hanford, Washington; Los Alamos, New Mexico; Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The city of Oak Ridge was so secret that it did not appear on any maps! The workers were never told what they were producing. By the time the first three bombs had been built, over thirty secret research sites had been developed across America.

President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945. He was succeeded by his vice-president Harry S. Truman. The Manhattan Project was so secret, not even Truman was aware of its presence until after he was sworn in as the new president. Truman, now fully aware of the dire casualties of World War II and in fear of the enemy developing similar weapons, continued the project.

Three bombs were developed. The first, nicknamed “Gadget” was exploded on July 16, 1945 in the New Mexico desert. It had the power of about 20,000 tons of TNT. President Truman was told of the success of the test while on his way to the Potsdam Conference in Berlin where the “Big Three” (Truman, Churchill and Stalin) were to finalize the terms to end the war in Europe. Germany had not managed to develop an atomic bomb but Truman now considered his new weapons as an end to the war with Japan.

The estimate of lives lost during an invasion of Japan by the Allied forces was determined to be excessive. The “island-hopping” campaigns in the Pacific now allowed American bombers bases from which they could attack Japan by air. After several successful B29 bombing raids on Japan they were offered an “unconditional surrender” meaning a total surrender, including giving up their worshipped ruler, Emperor Hirohito. Honor and pride within the Japanese military leaders refused the terms of surrender. In early March of 1945, napalm and incendiary bombs were dropped on Tokyo, setting the city on fire. Similar raids continued until May of that year but the Japanese still did not surrender.

On August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the second bomb nicknamed “Little Boy” was dropped from the B29 bomber, Enola Gay, on the city of Hiroshima. The city was destroyed in seconds, with approximately 100,000 killed instantly. Japan still refused to surrender. Leaflets were then dropped by American military planes warning them of a second similar attack unless they surrendered.

On August 9<sup>th</sup> 1945, the third and final bomb built, “Fat Man” was dropped on Nagasaki. Faced with continued attacks and not knowing if America had more similar bombs, on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1945 Japan surrendered unconditionally. World War II was finally over.

Albert Einstein  
Old Grove Road  
Peconic, Long Island  
August 2nd, 1939

F.D. Roosevelt  
President of the United States  
White House  
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

Some recent work by E. Fermi and L. Szilard, which has been communicated to me in manuscript, leads me to expect that the element uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the immediate future. Certain aspects of the situation which has arisen seem to call for watchfulness and if necessary, quick action on the part of the Administration. I believe therefore that it is my duty to bring to your attention the following facts and recommendations.

In the course of the last four months it has been made probable through the work of Joliot 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, by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements 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 this 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 too heavy for transportation by air.

The United States has only very poor ores of uranium in moderate quantities. There is some good ore in Canada and former Czechoslovakia, while the most important source of uranium is in the Belgian Congo.

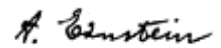
In view of this situation you may think it desirable to have some permanent contact maintained between the Administration and the group of physicists working on chain reactions in America. One possible way of achieving this might be for you to entrust the task with a person who has your confidence and who could perhaps serve in an unofficial capacity. His task might comprise the following:

a) to approach Government Departments, keep them informed of the further development, and put forward recommendations for Government action, giving particular attention to the problem of securing a supply of uranium ore for the United States.

b) to speed up the experimental work, which is at present being carried on within the limits of the budgets of University laboratories, by providing funds, if such funds be required, through his contacts with private persons who are willing to make contributions for this cause, and perhaps also by obtaining co-operation of industrial laboratories which have necessary equipment.

I understand that Germany has actually stopped the sale of uranium from the Czechoslovakian mines which she has taken over. That she should have taken such early action might perhaps be understood on the ground that the son of the German Under-Secretary of State, von Weizsacker, is attached to the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute in Berlin, where some of the American work on uranium is now being repeated.

Yours very truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "A. Einstein".

Albert Einstein

Source:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/truman-ein39/>

July 17, 1945

## **A PETITION TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES**

Discoveries of which the people of the United States are not aware may affect the welfare of this nation in the near future. The liberation of atomic power which has been achieved places atomic bombs in the hands of the Army. It places in your hands, as Commander-in-Chief, the fateful decision whether or not to sanction the use of such bombs in the present phase of the war against Japan.

We, the undersigned scientists, have been working in the field of atomic power. Until recently, we have had to fear that the United States might be attacked by atomic bombs during this war and that her only defense might lie in a counterattack by the same means. Today, with the defeat of Germany, this danger is averted and we feel impelled to say what follows:

The war has to be brought speedily to a successful conclusion and attacks by atomic bombs may very well be an effective method of warfare. We feel, however, that such attacks on Japan could not be justified, at least not unless the terms which will be imposed after the war on Japan were made public in detail and Japan were given an opportunity to surrender.

If such public announcement gave assurance to the Japanese that they could look forward to a life devoted to peaceful pursuits in their homeland and if Japan still refused to surrender our nation might then, in certain circumstances, find itself forced to resort to the use of atomic bombs. Such a step, however, ought not to be made at any time without seriously considering the moral responsibilities which are involved.

The development of atomic power will provide the nations with new means of destruction. The atomic bombs at our disposal represent only the first step in this direction, and there is almost no limit to the destructive power which will become available in the course of their future development. Thus a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.

If after this war a situation is allowed to develop in the world which permits rival powers to be in uncontrolled possession of these new means of destruction, the cities of the United States as well as the cities of other nations will be in continuous danger of sudden annihilation. All the resources of the United States, moral and material, may have to be mobilized to prevent the advent of such a world situation. Its prevention is

at present the solemn responsibility of the United States — singled out by virtue of her lead in the field of atomic power.

The added material strength which this lead gives to the United States brings with it the obligation of restraint and if we were to violate this obligation our moral position would be weakened in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes. It would then be more difficult for us to live up to our responsibility of bringing the unloosened forces of destruction under control.

In view of the foregoing, we, the undersigned, respectfully petition: first, that you exercise your power as Commander-in-Chief, to rule that the United States shall not resort to the use of atomic bombs in this war unless the terms which will be imposed upon Japan have been made public in detail and Japan knowing these terms has refused to surrender; second, that in such an event the question whether or not to use atomic bombs be decided by you in light of the considerations presented in this petition as well as all the other moral responsibilities which are involved.

**Leo Szilard and 69 co-signers**

Source: <http://www.dannen.com/decision/45-07-17.html>

**TO THE JAPANESE PEOPLE:**

America asks that you take immediate heed of what we say on this leaflet.

We are in possession of the most destructive explosive ever devised by man. A single one of our newly developed atomic bombs is actually the equivalent in explosive power to what 2000 of our giant B-29s can carry on a single mission. This awful fact is one for you to ponder and we solemnly assure you it is grimly accurate.

We have just begun to use this weapon against your homeland. If you still have any doubt, make inquiry as to what happened to Hiroshima when just one atomic bomb fell on that city.

Before using this bomb to destroy every resource of the military by which they are prolonging this useless war, we ask that you now petition the Emperor to end the war. Our president has outlined for you the thirteen consequences of an honorable surrender. We urge that you accept these consequences and begin the work of building a new, better and peace-loving Japan.

You should take steps now to cease military resistance. Otherwise, we shall resolutely employ this bomb and all our other superior weapons to promptly and forcefully end the war.

**EVACUATE YOUR CITIES.**

**ATTENTION JAPANESE PEOPLE. EVACUATE YOUR CITIES.**

Because your military leaders have rejected the thirteen part surrender declaration, two momentous events have occurred in the last few days.

The Soviet Union, because of this rejection on the part of the military has notified your Ambassador Sato that it has declared war on your nation. Thus, all powerful countries of the world are now at war with you.

Also, because of your leaders' refusal to accept the surrender declaration that would enable Japan to honorably end this useless war, we have employed our atomic bomb.

A single one of our newly developed atomic bombs is actually the equivalent in explosive power to what 2000 of our giant B-29s could have carried on a single mission. Radio Tokyo has told you that with the first use of this weapon of total destruction, Hiroshima was virtually destroyed.

Before we use this bomb again and again to destroy every resource of the military by which they are prolonging this useless war, petition the emperor now to end the war. Our president has outlined for you the thirteen consequences of an honorable surrender. We urge that you accept these consequences and begin the work of building a new, better, and peace-loving Japan.

Act at once or we shall resolutely employ this bomb and all our other superior weapons to promptly and forcefully end the war.

**EVACUATE YOUR CITIES.**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/truman-leaflets/>

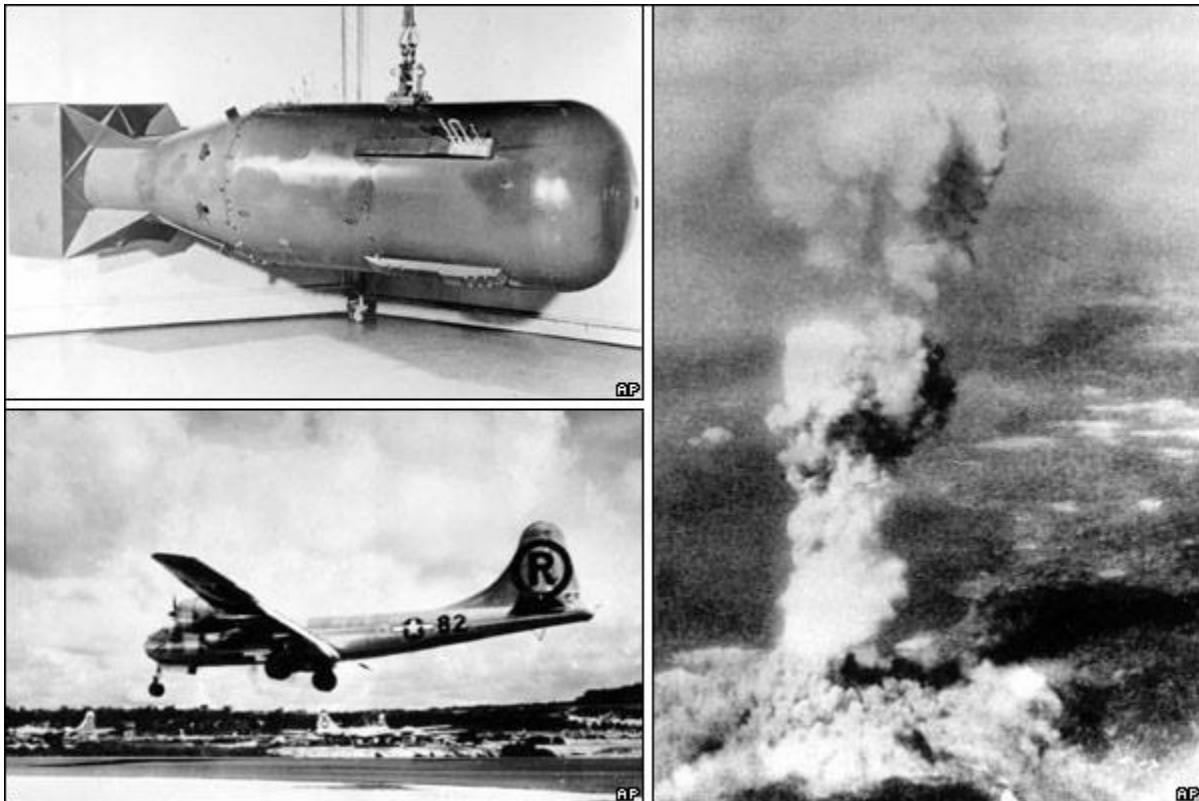
## Five Reasons for Dropping the Atomic Bomb

...According to J. Samuel Walker in his book, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*:

Truman and the Use of the Atomic Bomb against Japan, states that Truman justified dropping the bomb with five reasons:

- it would end the war successfully at the earliest possible moment
- it justified the effort and expense of building the atomic bombs
- it offered hope of achieving diplomatic gains in the growing rivalry with the Soviet Union
- there were a lack of incentives not to use the weapons
- because of America's hatred of the Japanese and a desire for vengeance

Source: <http://www.historyinreview.org/promptutter.html>





## The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb Questions

### Document 1 – *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb*

1. When were the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan?

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2. What was the name of the secret plan to make the atomic bombs?

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3. There were three (3) atomic bombs made, what were their nicknames?

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4. What took place on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1945?

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### Document 2 – *Albert Einstein's letter to President Roosevelt*

1. What scientific news did Einstein tell President Roosevelt was now possible due to the work of Fermi and Szilard?

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2. What special ore was needed by the United States and where could they obtain this necessary material?

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3. Why was Einstein afraid of German actions in Europe?

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Document 3 – *A Petition to the President of the United States*

1. Who wrote and signed his petition?

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2. This letter was written on July 17, 1945. What had just taken place in Germany?

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3. What were the writers of this petition asking of the President Roosevelt?

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4. What were their major reasons for this request?

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5. If you were Leo Szilard, why do you believe that it was necessary to inform President Roosevelt about your opinions?

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Document 4 – *To the Japanese People*

1. What event has just taken place before these leaflets were dropped over Japan from American airplanes?

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2. What warnings was this leaflet giving to the Japanese people if they did not comply with the request stated?

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3. If you were a Japanese citizen in 1945 and you read this leaflet, based on the content written, what actions would you take? Explain your response

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Document 5 – *Five Reasons for Dropping the Atomic Bomb*

Based on this secondary source, which of the five reasons do you believe was the most important? Explain your choice in detail

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