

The United States Uses the Atom Bomb

At 8:15 AM on August 6, 1945, a bomb code-named "Little Boy" slipped out the bay of the American B-29 *Enola Gay*. Forty-three seconds later the Japanese seaport of Hiroshima (*hir'ō shē'mə*) was engulfed in flame, a victim of the first atomic bomb attack in history. On August 9, a second atomic bomb was dropped on another Japanese city, Nagasaki (*nä'gə sä'kē*). Within a few days, the Japanese surrendered, and World War II was over. However, as casualties from the two bombings continued to mount for years afterward, some critics of the American decision to use the atomic bomb felt that a weapon of such unknown destructiveness should not have been used against civilians. Others felt that racism and revenge for Pearl Harbor had motivated the American decision. The following four selections present different sides to the argument over dropping the atomic bomb. The first is from a 1947 article by Henry Stimson (1867–1950), Secretary of War under presidents Roosevelt and Truman. What did Stimson say was uppermost in the minds of U.S. officials in their decision to use the atomic bomb?

IN REACHING THESE CONCLUSIONS [to use the bomb immediately and without warning against a Japanese city] the Interim Committee [group advising President Truman] carefully considered such alternatives as a detailed advanced warning or a demonstration in some uninhabited area. Both of these suggestions were discarded as impractical. They were not regarded as likely to be effective in compelling a surrender of Japan, and both of them involved serious risks. Even the New Mexico test would not give final proof that any

given bomb was certain to explode when dropped from an airplane. Quite apart from the generally unfamiliar nature of atomic explosives, there was the whole problem of exploding a bomb at a predetermined height in the air by a complicated mechanism which could not be tested in the static test of New Mexico. Nothing would have been more damaging to our effort to obtain surrender than a warning or a demonstration followed by a dud—and this was a real possibility. Furthermore, we had no bombs to waste. It was vital that a sufficient effect be quickly obtained with the few we had. . . .

The principal political, social, and military objective of the United States was the prompt and complete surrender of Japan. Only a complete destruction of her military power could open the way to lasting peace. . . .

As we understood it in July, there was a very strong possibility that the Japanese government might determine upon resistance to the end, in all the areas of the Far East under its control. In such an event the allies would be faced with the enormous task of destroying an armed force of five million men and five thousand suicide aircraft, belonging to a race [Stimson meant the Japanese] which had already amply demonstrated its ability to fight literally to the death.

The strategic plans of our armed forces for the defeat of Japan, as they stood in July, had been prepared without reliance upon the atomic bomb, which had not yet been tested in New Mexico. We were planning an intensified sea and air blockade, and greatly intensified strategic air bombing through the summer and early fall, to be followed on November 1 by an invasion of [the Japanese home islands]. . . . We estimated that if we should be forced to carry this plan to its conclusion, the major fighting would not end until the later part of 1946, at the earliest. I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties to American forces alone.

In order to end the war in the shortest possible time and to avoid the enormous losses of human life which otherwise confronted us, I felt that we must use the [Japanese] Emperor as our instrument to command and compel his people to cease fighting and to subject themselves to our authority through him, and that to accomplish this we must give him and his controlling advisors a compelling reason to accede to our demands. This furthermore must be of such a nature that his people could understand his decision. The bomb seemed to me to furnish a unique instrument for that purpose.

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The second reading is excerpts from an article by the American social critic Dwight Macdonald (1906–1982) that appeared in the fall of 1945. Did he feel that ignorance of the possible effect of atomic weapons excused those who used them?

THE ATOMIC BOMB RENDERS ANTICLIMACTICAL even the ending of the greatest war in history. *The concepts "war" and "progress" are now obsolete.* Both suggest human aspirations, emotions, aims, consciousness. "The greatest achievement of organized science in history," said President Truman after the Hiroshima catastrophe—which it probably was, and so much the worse for organized science. *The futility of modern warfare should now be clear.* Must we not now conclude, with Simone Weil [wil, French writer], that the technical aspect of war today is the evil, regardless of political factors? Can one imagine that the Bomb could ever be used "in a good cause"? Do not such means instantly, of themselves, corrupt any cause? . . .

The two bombs actually used were apparently designed as explosive and not gas bombs, perhaps from humanitarian considerations, perhaps to protect the American troops who will later have to occupy Japan. But intentions are one thing, results another. So feared was radioactivity at Hanford [a weapons research facility] that the most elaborate precautions were taken in the way of shields, clothes, etc. No such precautions were taken, obviously, on behalf of the inhabitants of Hiroshima; the plane dropped its cargo of half-understood poisons and sped away. . . .

The point is that none of those who produced and employed this monstrosity really knew just how deadly or prolonged those radioactive poisons would be. Which did not prevent them from completing their assignment, nor the army from dropping the bombs. Perhaps only among men like soldiers and scientists, trained to think "objectively"—i.e., in terms of means, not ends—could such irresponsibility and moral callousness be found. In any case, it was undoubtedly the most magnificent scientific experiment in history, with cities as the laboratories and people as the guinea pigs.

The bomb produced two widespread and, from the standpoint of The Authorities, undesirable emotional reactions in this country: a feeling of guilt at "our" having done this to "them" and anxiety lest some future "they" do this to "us." Both feelings were heightened by the superhuman scale of The Bomb. The Authorities have therefore

made valiant attempts to reduce the thing to a human context, where such concepts as Justice, Reason, Progress could be employed. Such moral defenses are offered as: the war was shortened and many lives, Japanese as well as American, saved; "we" had to invent and use The Bomb against "them" lest "they" invent and use it against "us"; the Japanese deserved it because they started the war, treated prisoners barbarously, etc., or because they refused to surrender. The flimsiness of these justifications is apparent; any atrocious action, absolutely any one, could be excused on such grounds.

The third selection is a poem by American poet Tim Reynolds (1936-) from an anthology published in 1964. From whose perspective did he view the use of the atomic bomb?

A Hell of a Day

This was a day of fumbling and petty accidents,
as though the population had grown all thumbs
at once. Watering her chrysanthemums,
Mrs Kamei was surprised to see the plants
blacken, water turn to steam. Both Dote and Michiko
noted the other's absence but not her own.
Mr. Kime lifted his hat, but his head was gone.
Mr. Watanabe rolled a double zero.
Photographing her son by the river bridge,
Mrs. Ume pressed the shutter and overexposed her film.
Her son's yawn swallowed him. And everything turned on
when pretty Miss Mihara snapped the light switch.
Then old Mr. Ekahome struck a match
to light his pipe, and the town caught, and dissolved in flame.

The fourth selection is an excerpt from "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," an essay by American writer Paul Fussell (1924-), which appeared in 1981. He emphasized "the importance of experience, sheer vulgar experience, in influencing, if not determining, one's views about that use of the bomb." What was his reaction, as a young American soldier, to the news that dropping the atomic bomb had forced Japan to surrender?

I was a 21-year-old second lieutenant of infantry leading a rifle platoon. Although still fit for combat, in the German war I had already been wounded in the back and the leg badly enough to be adjudged, after the war, 40 percent disabled. But even if my leg buckled and I fell to the ground whenever I jumped out of the back of a truck, and even if the very idea of more combat made me breathe in gasps and shake all over, my condition was held to be adequate for the next act. When the bombs were dropped and the news began to circulate that [the invasion of Japan] would not, after all, be necessary, when we learned to our astonishment that we would not be obliged in a few months to rush up the beaches near Tokyo assault-firing while being machine-gunned, mortared, and shelled, for all the practiced phlegm of our tough facades we broke down and cried with relief and joy. We were going to live. We were going to grow to adulthood after all. The killing was going to be over, and peace was actually going to be the state of things.

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. *Recognizing Bias* Do any of these writers seem biased? If so, against whom?
2. *Recognizing Values* Paul Fussell and Tim Reynolds offer personal perspectives on the use of the atomic bomb. Do they provide a better basis for judging the morality of its use than Stimson's and Macdonald's arguments? Why or why not?
3. *Linking Past and Present* One of the most pressing problems of international diplomacy today is the spread of nuclear weapons. Do you think that the United States, the only country in history ever to use atomic bombs in war, has the moral authority to stop other countries from acquiring nuclear arsenals? Why or why not?

WRITER'S PORTFOLIO

Write an essay using any of these selections as evidence to support your belief that the United States should or should not have used the atomic bomb against Japan.