

Conflict and Compromise: The Conditions and
Uses of the Atomic Bombs

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Historical Paper

Paper Length: 1681 words

In the mid-1940s, World War II casualties continued to mount each month for both the U.S. and Japan. When the ‘atomic bomb’ was presented as a possible way to win the war, the U.S. government was faced with a decision on how to use the weapon of mass destruction. U.S. president Harry S. Truman and his advisors made a series of in-government compromises surrounding the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan, killing more than 100,000 civilians¹ in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but ending the conflict of World War II and saving the U.S. and Japan from losing up to one million lives, far more than were lost in the droppings of the nuclear weapons.²

In 1938, as the build-up to World War II was escalating, scientists Otto Hahn and Lise Meitner made the discovery that when uranium and an atom came together at high speeds, the atom would split. This could ensue a much bigger explosion than had ever been possible before. The word spread quickly to other scientists in the field as Hitler continued to expand his territory by force, and President Franklin Roosevelt was soon notified. In his letter to Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, one of the intellectuals aware of the shocking discovery, writes:

“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.”³

The letter suggests that Germany was working on a “weapon of mass destruction” using fission. For fear of Germany having the upper hand, the U.S. began the ‘Manhattan Project’, a highly

¹ J W Dower, M Hachiya and W Wells, *Hiroshima Diary: The Journal of a Japanese Physician, August 6-September 30, 1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

² Lifton, Robert J. and Greg Mitchell. *Hiroshima in America: Years of Denial*. (p. XII)

³ Atomic Archive. “Einstein’s Letter to President Roosevelt - 1939.” AJ Software and Multimedia, 2015.

classified initiative to build an atomic bomb, also referred to as “the gadget”, and test it secretly in the Trinity, an uninhabited area of New Mexico.⁴

Meanwhile, Germany was being attacked on multiple fronts. After they surrendered in 1945, the U.S. began to bomb Japan more heavily than when the air raids started in 1944. By March, this started to “escalate into widespread firebombing”. Though the U.S. was the aggressor in these conflicts, they were not without their casualties. The number of Japanese fatalities was greater than the number of American ones in each of the bombed cities, but none of the air raids or firebombings resulted in Japanese surrender, and in some of the campaigns, the ratio of U.S. wounded, killed, or missing to Japanese killed or Japanese prisoners of war was low. The ratio of U.S. to Japanese casualties was one to 1.25 in the Iwo Jima campaign, and one to two in Okinawa.⁵

When the development of the atomic bomb was complete and it’s testing at the Trinity in New Mexico had succeeded, the question of the circumstances of the atomic bomb’s use was addressed in the U.S. government. The atomic bomb was kept secret, even to Congress, so Truman met with a private group called “the Interim Committee”, made up of Truman and his closest advisors, including James Byrnes, Secretary of State, and Henry Stimson, Secretary of War.

Although the question of whether or not to drop the bomb was almost cemented before Truman took over office, the compromise was the discussion of under which circumstances.⁶

⁴ Sheinkin, Steve. *BOMB: The Race to Build - and Steal - the World’s Most Deadly Weapon*. New York, 2012, Flash Point. (p.18)

⁵ 20.pdf. National Security Archive. Minutes of Meeting held at the White House on...

⁶ Frank, Richard B. *Downfall: The End of the Japanese Empire*. (p. 256)

The committee discussed where to drop the bomb, if the Soviet Union and/or the Japanese should be notified, and whether or not to agree to a conditional surrender if one should come up.

Firstly, there was where to drop the bomb. Fighting and firebombing earlier in the year had weakened some of Japan's most powerful cities like Okinawa, Kyushu, and Tokyo, and targeting a residential area would also benefit the U.S. because it would target a zone that remained undamaged in Japan.⁷ At a meeting on May 28, the Interim Committee had eliminated two cities from their previous list of five, leaving Kyoto, Hiroshima, and Niigata. Kyoto was considered because it had not been weakened by previous bombings and because of its large population. Niigata was also left on the list for similar reasons, though it was thought of as an alternative to Kyoto. However, the Interim Committee still wanted to target a military power, and Kyoto was more of a city of cultural importance than a fighting stronghold.⁸ Thus, the committee compromised, and Hiroshima was seen fit to be a target city of the bomb.

Next there was the question of whether or not the USSR should be notified of the bomb. Relations with Russia had been weakening since their conversion to communism,⁹ and some members of the Interim Committee feared that dropping the bomb without warning would create tension and mistrust between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. James W. Byrnes suggested that Japan would be more vulnerable if attacked by two different countries simultaneously, and that the USSR could help weaken Japan. However, because of the existing tension, other members worried that Russia could not be trusted with this information. Truman compromised, and the Soviet Union was notified of a "weapon of mass destruction", not naming the atom bomb.¹⁰

⁷ "The Interim Committee." The Atomic Heritage Foundation. 5 June 2014. Accessed September 2017. <https://www.atomicheritage.org/history/interim-committee>

⁸ Frank, Richard B. *Downfall: The End of the Japanese Empire*. (p. 255)

⁹ "Chief of Navy Says Japs Due for More Hell." Cumberland Times [Cumberland, Maryland]. 8 August 1943. (p. 1)

¹⁰ Walker, Samuel. *Prompt and Utter Destruction*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2016 (p. 67)

The Potsdam Conference, held from mid-July to the beginning of August in 1945, was another important meeting in which the circumstances of the bomb droppings were discussed. It was not held by the Interim committee, but rather by some of the most important officials and leaders in the world. The conference was led by the “Big Three”: Joseph Stalin, leader of communist Russia, Harry Truman, president of the U.S.A, and Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. In this conference, officials discussed how Japan should be notified of the bomb. Before, Leo Szilard, a scientist in the Manhattan project, and about 70 other scientists suggested to Truman to give Japan a demonstration of the atomic bomb’s extreme destructive power. However, this could lead the Japanese to flee or avoid the bomb in other ways. This would be less likely to happen if the U.S. did not name the weapon, because it was more likely to be an empty threat. However, Truman and the other officials at the Potsdam compromised. The Potsdam Declaration was signed, not outright warning Japan of an atomic bomb, but telling them to unconditionally surrender or face “prompt and utter destruction”.¹¹

After the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, most of the Japanese empire was for surrendering. Most had believed fighting to the death was honorable, and would rather suicide than surrender, until the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. This opened the eyes of some, but not all, members of the empire.¹² Because of this Japan kept fighting, and another bomb was launched on Nagasaki on August 9. Finally, Japan surrendered, and World War II was over.

Clearly, these compromises came with a cost. The first compromise - notification of an atom bomb to Japan - could have resulted in fleeing of the Japanese, therefore continuing the

¹¹ Walker. *Prompt and Utter Destruction*. (p.72)

¹² Bundy, McGeorge, and John Hersey. *Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped*. Performance by Peter Jennings, ABC, 1995.

war, or other methods of evading the weapon. About 170,000 people were killed in the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but at the rate the air raids and fire bombings were going, more people on both sides may have been lost if the conflict of the war had continued without use of the bomb. Telling Japan to unconditionally surrender or face destruction lowered the risk of the Japanese fleeing, because it was more likely to be an empty threat if it did not name the weapon, but gave them an opportunity to surrender before the launch of the atomic bomb.¹³ Giving the same level of notification to the Soviet Union as the U.S. did to Japan insured that Russia would not interfere with the use of the weapon, but secured the remaining relations with the USSR and prevented them from not trusting the U.S.¹⁴ Finally, dropping the bombs on military powers like Hiroshima and Nagasaki protected Kyoto, a city of major cultural importance, while still forcing Japan into surrender.¹⁵

Controversy over the compromises around the dropping of the atomic bomb still remains today, as illustrated by the Smithsonian's 1995 50-year anniversary "Enola Gay" exhibit, named after the plane that dropped the "Little Boy" atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The intention of the display was to showcase an objective look at the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Initially, the exhibit was planning to focus on both veterans' stories and their side of the war as well as the question of whether or not the bomb could have been used in a better way, but doing both was almost impossible. The initial draft of the exhibit conveyed that there might have been a better approach to winning the Pacific side of the war, or better conditions to drop the bomb under.¹⁶ However, many people accused Smithsonian of being "politically correct." Thus the

¹³ Walker, Samuel. *Prompt and Utter Destruction*. (p.72)

¹⁴ Walker, Samuel. *Prompt and Utter Destruction*. (p. 67)

¹⁵ Frank, Richard B. *Downfall: The End of the Japanese Empire*. (p. 255)

¹⁶ Walker, Samuel. *Prompt and Utter Destruction*. (p. 106)

Smithsonian changed their plan, this time showing more of the U.S. side of the compromises around the use of the bomb. Historians were not pleased with this model, and accused the exhibit of being “patriotically correct.” The Smithsonian substantially scaled back the display on January 30, 1995 because of the controversy. All that was shown at the museum was a plane, a plaque, and “a tape of the flight crew recounting the mission”.¹⁷ This scenario exemplifies the tension from both sides of the controversy over the use of the atomic bomb.

The conflict of World War II was devastating to both the Allies and the Axis, and came with great losses. In 1945, the war was dragging on. Faced with many choices on how to use this newly developed weapon of mass destruction, compromises on where to drop the bombs and whether or not Japan and/or the USSR should be warned were made. In the end, these compromises were the most reliable solution to the conflict of the war because, though there were immense casualties on the Japanese side, there would have been far more on both sides if not for the atomic bomb.

¹⁷ Lifton, Robert J. and Greg Mitchell. *Hiroshima in America: Years of Denial*. (p. XII)

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

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J W Dower, M Hachiya and W Wells, *Hiroshima Diary: The Journal of a Japanese Physician, August 6-September 30, 1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. This source provided a Japanese standpoint on the dropping of the atomic bomb.

Stimson, Henry. *Discussion w/ Byrnes, 1st Message from New Mexico*. National Security Archive. PDF. This source provided a new point of view on my topic and gave detailed information about communication between the government and the Manhattan Project and meetings that were taking place to determine the use of the bomb.

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Atomic Archive. “*Einstein’s Letter to President Roosevelt - 1939.*” AJ Software and Multimedia, 2015. This source provided Albert Einstein’s complete letter to FDR, allowing me to reference a letter mentioned in *BOMB* by Steve Shienkin. I used this in my context paragraph.

Bundy, McGeorge, and John Hersey. *Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped*. Performance by Peter Jennings, ABC, 1995. This film analyzed the decision to drop the atomic bomb. It also focused on the aftermath and controversy over the decision, helping me strengthen my long term effects paragraph.

Frank, Richard B. *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*. Random House, 1999. This source argued that the use of the bomb was not only necessary and better than the other options, but that it saved both American and Japanese lives. This was useful in my paragraphs about decision-making and compromise in the Interim Committee.

Hersey, John. *Hiroshima*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1946. This book explained the events of the dropping of the atomic bomb from a Japanese standpoint, focusing on six survivors. This was also one of my first sources, so it also helped me get basic facts about the bomb.

“The Interim Committee.” The Atomic Heritage Foundation. 5 June 2014. This source provided a simple condensed version of some of the options under consideration in the Interim Committee. It was a nice starting source and helped me with my where to drop the bomb paragraph.

Lifton, Robert Jay and Greg Mitchell. *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial*. G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995. This source provided useful information about the long term aftermath and tension of the atomic bomb. This helped me in my effects paragraph.

Miscamble, Wilson D. *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. This source provided and backed up information on meetings and opinions held by the Interim Committee. Miscamble argues that the dropping of the atomic bomb was necessary, and provided good information for my argument.

National Security Archive. *The Atomic Bomb and The End of World War II*. National Security Archive. National Security Archive. 7 August, 2017. Accessed 31 December, 2017. This source had a brief overview of the end of World War II citing a variety of primary in-government sources. This helped me fill in some information lacking from other sources focusing on one aspect of the dropping of the bomb.

Sheinkin, Steve. *BOMB: The Race to Build - And Steal - The World’s Most Deadly Weapon*. New York, 2012, Flash Point. This source helped me understand why Truman made the decision to drop the atomic bomb and the circumstances under which the decision was made.

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Walker, J. Samuel. *Prompt and utter destruction: Truman and the use of atomic bombs against Japan*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2016. This book clearly analyzed who thought what on the Interim Committee, providing detailed knowledge about certain meetings held to discuss circumstances under which to drop the bomb. It also included information on the aftermath and long term effects of the bomb.