

Where Historians Disagree - The Decision to Drop Atomic Bombs (from Alan Brinkley's *American History* 13th Ed.)

In the fall of 1994, the Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., installed in its main hall the fuselage of the *Enola Gay*, the airplane that dropped the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare on Hiroshima in 1945. Originally, the airplane was to have been accompanied by an exhibit that would include discussions of the many popular and academic controversies over whether the United States should have used the bomb. But a powerful group of critics—led by veterans' groups and aided by many members of Congress—organized to demand that the exhibit be altered and that it reflect only the "official" explanation of the decision. In the end, the museum decided to mount no exhibit at all. The *Enola Gay* hangs in the Smithsonian today entirely without explanation for the millions of tourists who see it each year.

The furor that surrounded the Air and Space Museum installation reflects the passions that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki continue to arouse among people around the world, and people in the United States and Japan in particular. It also reflects the continuing debate among historians about *how to explain, and evaluate*, President Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb in the war against Japan.

Truman himself, both at the time and in his 1955 memoirs, insisted that the decision was a simple and straightforward one. The alternative to using atomic weapons, he claimed, was an American invasion of mainland Japan that might have cost as many as a million lives. Given that choice, he said, the decision was easy. "I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used." [primary source] Truman's explanation of his decision has been supported by the accounts of many of his contemporaries: by Secretary of War Henry Stimson, in his 1950 memoir, *On Active Service in Peace and War*; by Winston Churchill; by Truman's senior military advisers. [primary source] It has also received considerable support from historians. Herbert Feis argued in *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II* (1966) that Truman had made his decision on purely military grounds—to ensure a speedy American victory. [secondary source] David McCullough, the author of a popular biography of Truman published in 1992, also accepted Truman's own account of his actions largely uncritically, as did Alonzo L. Hamby in *Man of the People* (1995), an important scholarly study of Truman. "One consideration weighed most heavily on Truman," Hamby concluded. "The longer the war lasted, the more Americans killed." Robert J. Donovan, author of an extensive history of the Truman presidency, *Conflict and Crisis* (1977), reached the same conclusion: "The simple reason Truman made the decision to drop the bomb was to end the war quickly and save lives." [secondary source]

Other scholars have strongly disagreed. As early as 1948, a British physicist, P. M. S. Blackett, wrote in *Fear, War, and the Bomb* that the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was "not so much the last military act of the second World War as the first major operation of the cold diplomatic war with Russia." The most important critic of Truman's decision is the historian Gar Alperovitz, the author of two influential books on the subject: *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (1965) and *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (1995). Alperovitz dismisses the argument that the bomb was used to shorten the war and save lives. Japan was likely to have surrendered soon even if the bomb had not been used, he claims; large numbers of American lives were not at stake in the decision. Instead, he argues, the United States used the bomb less to influence Japan than to intimidate the Soviet Union. Truman made his decision to bomb Hiroshima in the immediate aftermath of a discouraging meeting with Stalin at Potsdam. He was heavily influenced, therefore, by his belief that America needed a new way to force Stalin to change his behavior, that, as Alperovitz has argued, "the bomb would make Russia more manageable in Europe." [secondary source]

Martin J. Sherwin, in *A World Destroyed* (1975), is more restrained in his criticism of American policymakers. But he too argues that a rapidly growing awareness of the danger Stalin posed to the peace made leaders aware that atomic weapons—and their effective use—could help strengthen the American hand in the nation's critical relationship with the Soviet Union. Truman, Sherwin said, "increasingly came to believe that America's possession of the atomic bomb would, by itself, convince Stalin to be more cooperative."

John W. Dower's *War Without Mercy* (1986) contributed, by implication at least, to another controversial explanation of the American decision: racism. Throughout World War II, most Americans considered the Germans and the Italians to be military and political adversaries. They looked at the Japanese very differently: as members of a very different and almost bestial race. They were, many Americans came to believe, almost a subhuman species. And while Dower himself stops short of saying so, other historians have suggested that this racialized image of Japan contributed to American willingness to drop atomic bombs on Japanese cities. Even many of Truman's harshest critics, however, note that it is, as Alperovitz has written, "all but impossible to find specific evidence that racism was an important factor in the decision to attack Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

The debate over the decision to drop the atomic bomb is an unusually emotional one—driven in part by the tremendous moral questions that the destruction of so many lives raises—and it has inspired bitter professional and personal attacks on advocates of almost every position. It illustrates clearly how history has often been, and remains, a powerful force in the way societies define their politics, their values, and their character.