THE PROS AND CONS OF DROPPING THE ATOMIC BOMB

Some reasons why the bomb was needed or justified:

- On June 8, 1945, an imperial conference in Japan adopted “The Fundamental Policy to Be Followed Henceforth in the Conduct of the War,” which pledged to “prosecute the war to the bitter end in order to uphold the national polity, protect the imperial land, and accomplish the objectives for which we went to war.” Truman had no reason to believe that the proclamation meant anything other than what it said.

- The Japanese had demonstrated a near-fanatical resistance, fighting almost to the last man on Pacific Islands, committing mass suicide on Saipan, and unleashing kamikaze attacks at Okinawa. Firebombing had killed 100,000 in Tokyo with no discernible political effect. Only the atomic bomb could force Japan’s surrender.

- The United States warned Japan in the Potsdam declaration that it possessed weapons of mass destruction and that they would be used unless Japan agreed to an unconditional surrender. Japan refused to act on the warning.

- Militants in Japan were prepared to fight regardless of the consequences. They claimed to welcome an invasion of the home islands, promising to inflict such hideous casualties that the United States would retreat from its announced policy of unconditional surrender. Even after the bombing of Hiroshima, Japan refused to surrender.

- When the atomic bombs were dropped, fighting was still going on in the Philippines, China, and elsewhere. Every day the war continued, thousands of prisoners of war had to live (and possibly die) in abysmal conditions, and there were rumors that the Japanese intended to slaughter them if the homeland was invaded.

- An invasion of Japan would have caused casualties on both sides that could easily have exceeded the toll at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese had an estimated 2,000,000 troops in their home islands and were training millions of irregulars. America suffered nearly 50,000 casualties in the April 1945 invasion of Okinawa alone. The U.S. Joint War Plans Committee estimated that an invasion of Japan would cost approximately 40,000 dead, 150,000 wounded, and 3,500 missing in action for a total of 193,000 casualties. One can only imagine the reaction if tens of thousands of American boys had died or been wounded on Japanese soil and then it had become known that Truman had chosen not to use weapons that might have ended the war months sooner.

- None of the Joint Chiefs of Staff advised Truman that using atomic bombs against Japan would be militarily unnecessary or immoral, or both. Neither General Douglass MacArthur or Admiral Chester Nimitz—America’s highest ranking military officials in the Pacific theater—ever communicated to Truman any change of mind about the need for an invasion of Japan or expressed reservation about using the bombs to the President.

- The events at Pearl Harbor, fueled by wartime propaganda, encouraged Americans to regard Emperor Hirohito as no less a war criminal than Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini.
Although Truman had said on several occasions that he had no objections to retaining the emperor, he understandably refused to make the fist move.

- Roosevelt had announced an unconditional surrender policy as early as 1943 and Truman had publicly pledged to carry out his predecessor’s legacies.

- With only two bombs ready (and a third on the way by late August 1945) it was too risky to “waste” one in a demonstration.

- The two targeted cities would have been firebombed anyway.

- Immediate use of the bomb convinced the world of its horror and prevented future use when nuclear stockpiles were far larger.

- The bomb’s use unquestionably demonstrated America’s military superiority, impressed the Soviet Union, and perhaps made the Russians more manageable in Eastern Europe. It halted the war quickly enough that the USSR did not demand a joint occupation of Japan.

- Truman was Commander and Chief of the American armed forces, and he had a duty to the men under his command not shared by those sitting in moral judgment decades later.

**Why the bomb was not needed or unjustified:**

- The use of atomic weapons on Japan was an indiscriminately cruel crime against humanity. These unnecessary acts violated the Hague Convention respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, which prohibited the use of cruel weapons. More important, their use contradicted America’s real, intended, or perceived values and status as a moral leader in the world. Conventional firebombing would have caused as much significant damage without making the U.S. the first (and only) nation to use nuclear weapons on human targets.

- Japan was ready to call it quits anyway. More than sixty of its cities had been destroyed by conventional bombing, the home islands were being blockaded by the U.S. Navy, and the Soviet Union entered the war with Japan by attacking Japanese troops in Manchuria. The cumulative effects of these events were enough to persuade Japan to surrender. All the U. S. had to do was wait.

- The *United States Strategic Bomb Survey*, published in 1946, concluded that Japan would have surrendered by November 1, 1945, “even if atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planed or contemplated.”

- American refusal to modify its “unconditional surrender” demand to allow the Japanese to keep their emperor needlessly prolonged Japan’s resistance. The alternative to allow Japan to retain a constitutional monarchy was supported by many key individuals, including Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Chairman of the Join Chiefs of Staff George
Marshall, and former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The inclusion of this provision would have hastened Japan’s surrender, but Truman refused in part because he was concerned with how the American public would react to a policy of appeasement. Ironically, this provision was essentially allowed once Japan's unconditional surrender had been received.

- A demonstration explosion over Tokyo Harbor would have convinced Japan’s leaders to quit without killing many people.

- A number of key individuals, including Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, physicist Albert Einstein, and the principle inventor of the atomic bomb, Robert Oppenhiemer, concluded ultimately that atomic weapons were immoral and should not have been used on Japan.

- Even if Hiroshima was necessary, the U.S. did not give enough time for word to filter out of its devastation before bombing Nagasaki. Dropping the second bomb constituted needless barbarism.

- The radioactive effects of the atomic bombs used on Japan—as well as the radioactive effects of literally hundreds of nuclear tests during the Cold War—continue to wage war on the environment and future generations.

- The bomb was used partly to justify the $2 billion spent on its development.

- The bomb was used to quell the American public’s utter hatred of Japan and avenge America's humiliation at Pearl Harbor.

- Hiroshima and Nagasaki were of limited military value. Civilians outnumbered troops in Hiroshima five or six to one.

- Japanese lives were sacrificed simply for power politics between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

- The long range effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were contrary to U.S. interests. America’s use of atomic weapons, and status as the world’s only superpower, inspired the Soviet Union to follow suit and develop their own bomb in 1949. This led to a prolonged Cold War and arms race between the two nations, and events like the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world to the brink of global nuclear war. Economically, the arms race resulted in wasted expenditures of literally billions of dollars on weapons of mass destruction, which thankfully were never used. The potential for these monies to have addressed vexing global problems like poverty, hunger, and disease can only be imagined. Instead, for nearly half a century the world lived in fear that the button would be pushed. Even today, the threat of nuclear proliferation and the possibilities of nuclear terrorism or accidents involving nuclear weapons remain quite real.

Harry Truman Justifies the Bombing (1945)
My own knowledge of these [atomic] developments had come about only after I became President, when Secretary [of War] Stimson had given me the full story. He had told me at that time that the project was nearing completion, and that a bomb could be expected within another four months. It was at his suggestion, too, that I had then set up a committee of top men and had asked them to study with great care the implications the new weapon might have for us. . . .

It was their recommendation that the bomb be used against the enemy as soon as it could be done. They recommended further that it should be used without specific warning, and against a target that would clearly show its devastating strength. I had realized, of course, that an atomic bomb explosion would inflict damage and casualties beyond imagination. On the other hand, the scientific advisers of the committee reported, "We can propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use." It was their conclusion that no technical demonstration they might propose, such as over a deserted island, would be likely to bring the war to an end. It had to be used against an enemy target.

The final decision of where and when to use the atomic bomb was up to me. Let there be no mistake about it. I regarded the bomb as a military weapon, and never had any doubt that it should be used. The top military advisers to the President recommended its use, and when I talked to Churchill, he unhesitatingly told me that he favored the use of the atomic bomb if it might aid to end the war.

In deciding to use this bomb I wanted to make sure that it would be used as a weapon of war in the manner prescribed by the laws of war. That meant that I wanted it dropped on a military target. I had told Stimson that the bomb should be dropped as nearly as possibly upon a war production center of prime military importance. . . .

Four cities were finally recommended as targets: Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata, and Nagasaki. They were listed in that order as targets for the first attack. The order of selection was in accordance with the military importance of these cities, but allowance would be given for weather conditions at the time of the bombing.

The devastating impact of the atomic bomb, together with the Soviet Union's sudden entry into the war against Japan, undoubtedly forced the Japanese surrender sooner than would otherwise have been possible. Even so, the fanatical military men in Tokyo almost won out for a last-ditch stand.

NOTE: In 1959, during interchanges with the students of Columbia University, former president Truman vigorously justified his action. He noted that "when we asked them to surrender at Potsdam, they gave us a very snotty answer. That is what I got. . . . They told me to go to hell, words to that effect." Mr. Truman insisted that the dropping of the bomb was "just a military maneuver, that is all," because "we were destroying the factories that were making more munitions." He then concluded: "All this uproar about what we did and what could have been stopped--should we take these wonderful Monday morning quarterbacks, the experts who are supposed to be right? They don't know what they are talking about. I was there. I did it. I would do it again."

In his personal narrative Atomic Quest, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Arthur Holly Compton, who directed atomic research at the University of Chicago’s Metallurgical Laboratory during the Second World War, tells of receiving an urgent visit from J. Robert Oppenheimer while vacationing in Michigan during the summer of 1942. Oppenheimer and the brain trust he assembled had just calculated the possibility that an atomic explosion could ignite all the hydrogen in the oceans or the nitrogen in the atmosphere. If such a possibility existed, Compton concluded, “these bombs must never be made.” As Compton said, “Better to accept the slavery of the Nazis than to run a chance of drawing the final curtain on mankind.” Certainly, any reasonable human being could be expected to respond similarly.

Three years later, with Hitler dead and the Nazis defeated, President Harry Truman faced a comparably weighty decision. He writes in his 1955 memoirs that, on the first full day of his presidency, James F. Byrnes told him the U.S. was building an explosive “great enough to destroy the whole world.” On April 25, 1945, Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Brigadier General Leslie Groves gave Truman a lengthy briefing in which Stimson reiterated the warning that “modern civilization might be completely destroyed” by atomic bombs and stressed that the future of mankind would be shaped by how such bombs were used and subsequently controlled or shared. Truman recalled Stimson “gravely” expressing his uncertainty about whether the U.S. should ever use the bomb, “because he was afraid it was so powerful that it could end up destroying the whole world.” Truman admitted that, listening to Stimson and Groves and reading Groves’s accompanying memo, he “felt the same fear.”

Others would also draw, for Truman, the grave implications of using such hellish weapons . . . Leading atomic scientists cautioned that surprise use of the bomb against Japan could precipitate an uncontrollable arms race with the Soviet Union that boded future disaster for mankind. The warnings reached Truman’s closest advisors if not the President himself. Truman nevertheless authorized use of atomic bombs against Japan, always insisting he felt no “remorse” and even bragging that he “never lost any sleep over that decision.” For over sixty years, historians and other analysts have struggled to make sense of Truman’s and his advisors’ actions and the relevance of his legacy for his successors in the Oval Office.

In an incisive and influential essay, historian John Dower divides American interpretations of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki into two basic narratives—the “heroic” or “triumphal” and the “tragic.” The “heroic” narrative, shaped by wartime science administrator James Conant and Stimson, and reaffirmed by all postwar American presidents up to and including Bill Clinton, with only Eisenhower demurring, justifies the bombing as an ultimately humane, even merciful, way of bringing the “good war” to a rapid conclusion and avoiding an American invasion against a barbaric and fanatically resistant foe. Although Truman initially emphasized revenge for Japan’s treacherous attack on Pearl Harbor, subsequent justifications by Truman, Conant, Stimson, and others stressed instead the tremendous number of Americans who would have been killed and wounded in an invasion. As time passed, defenders of the bombing increasingly added generous estimates of the number of Japanese who the atomic bombings saved. While highlighting the decisive role of atomic bombs in the final victory had the unfortunate consequence of downplaying the heroic efforts and enormous sacrifices of millions of American soldiers, it served American propaganda needs by diminishing the significance of Soviet entry into the Pacific War, discounting the Soviet contribution to defeating Japan, and showcasing the super weapon that the United States alone possessed.
This victor’s narrative privileges possible American deaths over actual Japanese ones. As critics of the bombing have become more vocal in recent years, projected American casualty estimates have grown apace—from the War Department’s 1945 prediction of 46,000 dead to Truman’s 1955 insistence that General George Marshall feared losing a half million American lives to Stimson’s 1947 claim of over 1,000,000 casualties to George H.W. Bush’s 1991 defense of Truman’s “tough calculating decision, [which] spared millions of American lives,” to the 1995 estimate of a crew member on Bock’s Car, the plane that bombed Nagasaki, who asserted that the bombing saved six million lives—one million Americans and five million Japanese. The recent inclusion of Japanese and other Asian casualties adds an intriguing dimension to the triumphal narrative, though one that played little, if any, role in the wartime calculations of Truman and his top advisors.

To this triumphal narrative, Dower counter poses a tragic one. Seen from the perspective of the bombs’ victims, the tragic narrative condemns the wanton killing of hundreds of thousands of civilians and the inordinate suffering of the survivors. Although Hiroshima had some military significance as a naval base and home of the Second General Army Headquarters, as Truman insisted, American strategic planners targeted the civilian part of the city, maximizing the bomb’s destructive power and civilian deaths. It produced limited military casualties. Admiral William Leahy angrily told an interviewer in 1949 that although Truman told him they would “only…hit military objectives….they went ahead and killed as many women and children as they could which was just what they wanted all the time.” The tragic narrative, in contrast to the heroic narrative, rests on the conviction that the war could have been ended without use of the bombs given U.S. awareness of Japan’s attempts to secure acceptable surrender terms and of the crushing impact that the imminent Soviet declaration of war against Japan would have . . .

Although Dower is undoubtedly correct that the heroic and tragic narratives . . . these two narratives by no means exhaust the range of interpretive possibilities. Missing from much of the debate has been consideration of what I call the apocalyptic narrative, a framework for understanding U.S. actions that has even greater relevance to today’s citizens who must continue to grapple with the long-term ramifications of nuclear war, particularly the threat of extinction of human life. While this third narrative has important elements in common with the tragic narrative, maintaining, as did much of America’s top military command, that surrender could have been induced without the use of atomic bombs, it does not see the Japanese as the only victims and holds Truman, Byrnes, and Groves, among others, to a much higher level of accountability for knowingly putting at risk all human and animal existence . . .

By unleashing nuclear weapons on the world as the U.S. did in 1945, in a manner that Soviet leaders, as expected, immediately recognized as ominous and threatening, Truman and his collaborators were gambling with the future of life on the planet. Scientists at Chicago’s Met Lab had issued reports and circulated petitions emphasizing just this point before the bombs were tested and used, warning against instigating a "race for nuclear armaments" that could lead to “total mutual destruction.”

In order to force immediate surrender and save American lives by delivering a knockout blow to an already staggering Japan, or, as Gar Alperovitz alternatively argues, to brandish U.S. might against and constrain the Soviet Union in Europe and Asia, or, as Tsuyoshi Hasegawa contends, to exact revenge against Japan while limiting Soviet gains in Asia, Truman willingly risked the unthinkable. He did so without even attempting other means to procure Japanese surrender, such as clarifying the surrender terms to insure the safety and continued “rule” of
Emperor Hirohito as Stimson and almost all of Truman’s other close advisors urged him to do, but which he and Byrnes resisted until after the two atomic bombs had been dropped; allowing Stalin to sign the Potsdam Proclamation, which would have signaled imminent Soviet entry into the war; or announcing and, if necessary, demonstrating the existence of the bomb.

What terrified many scientists from an early stage in the process was the realization that the bombs that were used to wipe out Hiroshima and Nagasaki were but the most rudimentary and primitive prototypes of the incalculably more powerful weapons on the horizon--mere first steps in a process of maximizing destructive potential. Physicist Edward Teller impressed this fact on the group of “luminaries” Oppenheimer assembled in the summer of 1942, looking past the atomic bomb, which he considered as good as done, toward development of a hydrogen bomb, thousands of times more powerful, which became the focus of most of their efforts that summer.

Not all scientists shared Teller’s enthusiasm over this prospect . . . In July 1945, physicist Leo Szilard drafted a petition signed by 155 Manhattan Project scientists urging the President not to act precipitously in using atomic bombs against Japan, warning: “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 the purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.” Arthur Compton observed, “It introduces the question of mass slaughter, really for the first time in history” . . . Oppenheimer correctly pointed out to the participants in that same Interim Committee meeting that within 3 years it might be possible to produce bombs with an explosive force between 10 and 100 megatons of TNT -- thousands of times more powerful than the bomb that would destroy Hiroshima.

Hence, the apocalyptic narrative, applying an ethical standard to which leaders of the time could realistically be held, and an understanding of short-term and long-term consequences that should be expected of policymakers, indicts Truman, Byrnes, and Groves not only for the wholesale slaughter of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki but for behaving recklessly and thoughtlessly in inflicting a reign of terror on the rest of humankind . . . In 1945, Truman contemplated the prospect of future annihilation but apparently gave it little serious consideration. To make matters worse, he did next to nothing to make amends for his wartime shortsightedness when the opportunity to control nuclear weapons presented itself again during the first year of the postwar era . . .

Truman did not learn of the atomic bomb project until Stimson told him, following the April 12 emergency Cabinet meeting, that the U.S. was working on “a new explosive of almost unbelievable destructive power.” Over the next few hours, days, and weeks, Truman made a series of decisions that would set the course for his presidency and for the future of much of the world . . .

The fact that the bomb project had generated so much momentum by the time Truman became president that it would have taken bold leadership on his part to avoid using these new weapons has led some observers to minimize his personal responsibility. On several occasions, Groves insisted that Truman was swept along by the tide of events . . . Groves commented, “Truman did not so much say ‘yes’ as not say ‘no.’ It would indeed have taken a lot of nerve to say ‘no’ at that time.”[21] He saved his most demeaning assessment for a 1963 article in Look Magazine, in which he described Truman as “a little boy on a toboggan.”
Truman relied heavily upon the advice of Groves and Byrnes, both of whom were strongly committed to using the bombs and both of whom saw their use as a means of firing a warning shot across the Soviet bow . . . Groves reiterated this sentiment when he acknowledged: “There was never from about two weeks from the time I took charge of this Project any illusion on my part but that Russia was our enemy, and the Project was conducted on that basis. I didn’t go along with the attitude of the country as a whole that Russia was a gallant ally.”

Not only did Truman rely on fervent proponents of using the bomb, he ignored the entreaties of Stimson, State Department Japan expert and former Ambassador Joseph Grew, Admiral William Leahy, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy, and other knowledgeable insiders who urged him to change the surrender terms and inform the Japanese that they could keep the emperor. Indeed, this is precisely what the U.S. ultimately did—but only after dropping the two atomic bombs in the US arsenal. Several scholars have argued that such modifications of surrender terms could have significantly expedited Japanese surrender, saving numerous Japanese and American lives, and obviating use of the bombs, especially if combined with announcement of the impending Soviet declaration of war, a development that Japanese leaders dreaded. General Douglas MacArthur told former President Herbert Hoover that, if Truman had acted upon Hoover’s May 30, 1945 memo and changed the surrender terms, the war would have ended months earlier. “That the Japanese would have accepted it and gladly,” he averred, “I have no doubt.” Hoover believed the Japanese would have negotiated as early as February.

Truman ordered the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki despite the fact that he and his top advisors were aware that the Japanese had abandoned hope for military victory and were seeking an end to the war. Prince Konoe Fumimaro had affirmed the view held by many Japanese leaders when he informed Emperor Hirohito in February 1945 that “defeat is inevitable.” Japan’s military desperation was apparent to Americans who analyzed the intercepted July exchanges between Foreign Minister Togo Shigenori in Tokyo and Ambassador Sato Naotake in Moscow. The Pacific Strategic Intelligence Summary for the week of Potsdam meeting reported: “it may be said that Japan now, officially if not publicly, recognizes her defeat. Abandoning as unobtainable the long-cherished goal of victory, she has turned to the twin aims of (a) reconciling national pride with defeat, and (b) finding the best means of salvaging the wreckage of her ambitions . . .

Truman also decided to issue the Potsdam Proclamation without Stalin’s signature, despite Stalin’s eagerness to sign and Truman’s understanding that Soviet entry into the war would deeply demoralize Japan and end Japan’s misguided hopes of securing better surrender terms through Soviet intercession. Soviet entry also destroyed the possibility that Japan’s Ketsu-go strategy would succeed in inflicting heavy casualties on the Allied invading force, ultimately leaving the Japanese with little choice but surrender. Truman insisted that firming up Soviet involvement was his principal reason for going to Potsdam. Upon receiving Stalin’s confirmation, he exulted, Stalin will “be in the Jap War on August 15th. Fini Japs when that comes about.” Several intelligence estimates drew the same conclusion, including a June 30 War Department report that stated, “The entry of the Soviet Union into the war would finally convince the Japanese of the inevitability of complete defeat.”

In the end, the Soviet invasion proved a far more powerful inducement to surrender than did the atom bombs. Japanese leaders, many demonstrating little concern for the suffering of their own people, had already witnessed U.S. firebombing and often near-total destruction of 64 cities without ending the war. The U.S. had shown it could level Japanese cities almost at will in the
months preceding Hiroshima. Whether the U.S. did so with hundreds of bombers or with one plane and one bomb did not fundamentally alter the strategic situation in the eyes of Japanese leaders . . .

Top U.S. military leaders recognized Japan’s growing desperation, prompting several to later insist that the use of atomic bombs was not needed to secure victory. Those who believed that dropping atomic bombs on Japan was morally repugnant and/or militarily unnecessary included Admiral William Leahy, General Dwight Eisenhower, General Douglas MacArthur, General Curtis LeMay, General Henry Arnold, Brigadier General Bonner Fellers, Admiral Ernest King, General Carl Spaatz, Admiral Chester Nimitz, and Admiral William “Bull” Halsey. Groves admitted that he circumvented the Joint Chiefs of Staff to avoid, in part, “Admiral Leahy’s disbelief in the weapon and its hoped-for effectiveness; this would have made action by the Joint Chiefs quite difficult.” In reflecting on his opposition, Leahy, who chaired the meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and served as Truman’s personal chief of staff, emphasized the barbaric nature of the atomic bombs, not doubts about their effectiveness, chillingly proclaiming, “It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender....My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages.”

Eisenhower was equally appalled, writing in his 1963 Mandate for Change that when he learned from Stimson at Potsdam that use of the bomb was imminent, “I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives. It was my belief that Japan was, at that very moment, seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of ‘face.’” Eisenhower told biographer Stephen Ambrose that on July 20, three days after learning this shocking news from Stimson, he met with Truman and his advisors and directly recommended that they not use the bombs. Other military leaders drew similar conclusions about the imminence of Japanese surrender without use of atomic bombs. Air Force Chief of Staff General Henry Arnold wrote, “it always appeared to us that, atomic bomb or no atomic bomb, the Japanese were already on the verge of collapse.” . . . Such considerations led Admiral Leahy to conclude that an invasion would not have been necessary. Leahy explained, “I was unable to see any justification, from a national-defense point of view, for an invasion of an already thoroughly defeated Japan.”

. . . No one can say with absolute certainty that assuring the Japanese about the emperor, notifying them about Soviet entry, and alerting them to or demonstrating the bomb would have brought about Japanese surrender. But the chances that this formula would have succeeded seem very good, despite the vacillation by the emperor and the obstinacy of some of Japan’s military leaders. [38] There is even a chance that taking these steps might have sped up the end of the war and saved American lives. However, the relevant question is why the president of the United States, given his expressed understanding of the potentially cataclysmic nature of these weapons, would not seek to avoid unveiling weapons “great enough to destroy the whole world” in a way that would dramatically increase the chances for future disaster . . .

Paul Boyer has cogently demonstrated that the American public responded to news of Hiroshima with an eerie sense of foreboding and widespread perception that American cities could one day suffer the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and worse--much, much worse. News commentators, editorial writers, and journalists, instead of celebrating the military use of the bombs against Japanese cities, foresaw the dire implications for the future of the American
people and the world. On the evening of August 6, NBC radio news commentator H.V. Kaltenborn declared, “For all we know, we have created a Frankenstein! We must assume that with the passage of only a little time, an improved form of the new weapon we use today can be turned against us.”

CBS radio commentator Edward R. Murrow captured the national sense of fear and foreboding on August 12, reporting, “Seldom, if ever, has a war ended leaving the victors with such a sense of uncertainty and fear, with such a realization that the future is obscure and that survival is not assured.” Following the announcement that Hiroshima had been bombed, G. Bromley Oxnam and John Foster Dulles of the Federal Council of Churches issued a statement contending that “If we, a professedly Christian nation, feel morally free to use atomic energy in that way, men elsewhere will accept that verdict. Atomic weapons will be looked upon as a normal part of the arsenal of war and the stage will be set for the sudden and final destruction of mankind.” Much of the public concurred. Twenty-six percent of respondents to an August Gallup Poll thought it “likely” that “some day experiments in smashing atoms will cause an explosion which will destroy the entire world.” Reflecting on the “almost infinite destructive power” of this “demonic invention,” . . . the Washington Post noted on August 26, the life expectancy of the human species had “dwindled immeasurably in the course of two brief weeks.”

. . . On his way back from Potsdam aboard the USS Augusta, Truman received news that the city of Hiroshima had been virtually wiped off the map. He proclaimed that “This is the greatest thing in history!” There is little evidence that, despite his statements indicating awareness of the forces he had unleashed, he ever gave the bomb decision the serious thought it deserved . . . When an interviewer asked Truman whether the decision was morally difficult to make, he responded, “Hell no, I made it like that,” snapping his fingers. In fact, Truman never publicly acknowledged doubts or misgivings. When Edward R. Murrow asked him in a 1958 interview if he had any regrets about using the bomb or about any of his other presidential decisions, Truman responded, “Not the slightest—not the slightest in the world.”

Nor did he welcome others expressing doubts. Upon meeting Oppenheimer for the first time on October 25, 1945, Truman, with his typical insecurity-masking bluster, asked Oppenheimer to guess when the Soviets would develop a bomb. When Oppenheimer admitted that he did not know, Truman declared that he did: “Never.” Unnerved, Oppenheimer said at one point, “Mr. President, I feel I have blood on my hands.” Truman responded angrily. “I told him the blood was on my hands—to let me worry about that,” he recounted to David Lilienthal. Truman liked this story enough to repeat it on several occasions, his responses varying slightly, but his contempt for Oppenheimer always evident. He told Acheson, “I don’t want to see that son-of-a-bitch in this office ever again,” and another time called him a “cry-baby scientist.”

. . . Hiroshima counted 140,000 dead by the end of 1945 and perhaps as many as 200,000 by 1950. Nagasaki lost over 70,000. Tens of thousands more have died since as a result of bomb-related injuries from blast, fire, and radiation. Although both cities are now thriving modern metropolises, magnificent testaments to the resiliency of the human spirit, their citizens have made sure that their special places in history are remembered. The people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, led by the hibakusha, have engaged in a valiant struggle against forgetting. Akira Kurosawa expresses their dilemma in Rhapsody in August, his powerful 1995 film about the younger generation’s encounter with the history of Nagasaki, in a voice-over during a scene where sightseers casually stroll around and photograph monuments in the Nagasaki Peace Park. The narrator observes, “But nowadays, for most people... Nagasaki happened once upon a time. As the years pass, people are apt to forget...even the most dreadful things.” Many never
learn them in the first place. Public opinion polls show that over one-third of U.S. citizens don’t know that Hiroshima was the site of the first atomic attack, with the numbers rising to well over 40 percent among those aged 18-29. Or consider the jubilation of many Indians and Pakistanis upon learning that their countries had successfully tested nuclear weapons in 1998, a reaction that reflects the growing belief that acquisition of nuclear weapons is the quickest route to international respectability. Equally uncomprehending was General Mirza Aslam Berg, retired chief of Pakistan’s armed forces, who dismissed fears of nuclear war between those two nuclear powers, commenting, “I don’t know what you’re worried about. You can die crossing the street, hit by a car, or you could die in a nuclear war. You’ve got to die someday, anyway.”

. . . Year after year, when I started taking my students to the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Museum, I caught myself copying the same label because in its ludicrous disproportionality it represented the logical culmination of the process unleashed by Truman in 1945--that by 1985 the destructive power of the world’s nuclear arsenals had reached the equivalent of 1.47 million Hiroshima bombs.

The point of the apocalyptic narrative is not simply to blame Harry Truman for the present nuclear insanity. Clearly, many share responsibility for a state of affairs in which nine nations have nuclear weapons, and numerous others are maneuvering to join this not-so-exclusive club. Nor is it to question Americans’ wartime valor, downplay Japan’s responsibility for its cruel treatment of other Asian peoples and of Allied prisoners, overlook Stalin’s interest in keeping the Pacific War going until the Soviet invasion of Manchuria had at least begun, or minimize the culpability of Emperor Hirohito and other Japanese leaders for prolonging the war in complete disregard of the well-being of the Japanese people. Similarly, it is not simply to condemn the needless death and ongoing suffering of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian victims, whose anguish and misery must be remembered and mourned along with the death and suffering of tens of millions of victims on all sides. The real lesson is that Harry Truman chose to use atomic bombs instead of attempting other potentially viable means to end the war despite his understanding, on some level, of what his decision augured for the future.

. . . Use of atomic bombs has been seriously contemplated and/or threatened by almost every postwar president--by Truman during the Soviet blockade of Berlin in 1948, by Truman and Eisenhower over Korea, by Eisenhower administration officials in support of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, by Eisenhower during the Lebanon crisis in 1958 and in response to a threatened Chinese invasion of Quemoy and Matsu in 1954 and 1958, by Kennedy during the Berlin crisis in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, by Johnson to defend marines at Khe Sanh, Vietnam in 1968, by Nixon and Kissinger against the North Vietnamese between 1969 and 1972, by Nixon to deter Soviet actions on several occasions between 1969 and 1973, by Carter in Iran in 1980, by George H.W. Bush and Clinton in Iraq, and by George W. Bush in wholesale fashion in the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review and afterwards. As Daniel Ellsberg has astutely argued, it is a mistake to say that the U.S. has not “used” nuclear weapons since Nagasaki. Ellsberg contends, “Again and again, generally in secret from the American public, U.S. nuclear weapons have been used, for quite different purposes: in the precise way that a gun is used when you point it at someone’s head in a direct confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled.”

Hence, the likelihood exists that, so long as nuclear weapons remain in the arsenals of the United States and other nations, they will be used and with consequences potentially far more dire than the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That Harry Truman could act in so malign a fashion, provoking the outrage and condemnation of military, religious, and scientific leaders,
as well as ordinary citizens, in the U.S. and abroad, only suggests what other world leaders will be capable of doing if such weapons remain at their disposal.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

Please write a detailed paragraph for each of the following questions. Typed responses are due the day of the hot seat or in-class discussion.

1. What general or specific biases are present in Kuznick’s article and to what extent do they undermine his credibility?

2. Should historical figures, like Truman, be held accountable for the long-term ramifications of their decisions?

3. Many contemporary historians see Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb as justifiable in the context of the time. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

4. Generally speaking, have nuclear weapons thus far been more of an asset or a liability in the development of American history since 1945? Why?