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# President Truman's Announcement of the Dropping of an Atom Bomb on Hiroshima, 1945

In World War II the aerial bombing of civilian populations became increasingly common. A war that began for the British in a Nazi blitzkrieg of bombs and missiles on London, and that began for the United States in a Japanese air attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbor, came to a conclusion with an increased intensity of allied aerial attacks on the populated cities of Germany and Japan. In February of 1945, 1,300 U.S. and British bombers dropped 3,900 tons of explosives on the medieval German city of Dresden, unleashing a firestorm that claimed tens of thousands of lives. Tokyo was bombed throughout the war, but in March of 1945, a single bombing run of 179 new long-range B-29s took well over a hundred thousand lives. By the end of the war 50 percent of Tokyo, the most densely populated city in the world, had been leveled, an area that had once housed one and a half million people. By the summer of 1945, a new kind of weapon was about to harness the atom for even greater destruction.

The U.S. effort to make an atomic bomb had been a secret wartime project, begun initially by President Franklin D. Roosevelt out of fear that Germany was already developing one. Work continued in 1945, despite the death of Roosevelt in April and the surrender of Germany in May, as the United States and its allies turned their attention to defeating the Japanese in the Pacific. President Truman was also interested in the propaganda value of the bomb to ward off possible Soviet

Source: "Statement by the President Announcing the Use of the A-Bomb at Hiroshima," Truman Library, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/calendar/viewpapers.php?pid=100.

intentions in China and Japan. On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped the world's first atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima, Japan. Three days later, a second atomic bomb was dropped on the Japanese city of Nagasaki. On August 15, Japan surrendered.

This selection is President Truman's address after the bombing of Hiroshima. What reasons does he give for the use of such a weapon? How does he relate the atomic bomb to the use of other weapons of war? How does he relate it to the issue of peace?

### THINKING HISTORICALLY

President Truman was aware there would be controversy about the use of an atomic bomb. He had received a petition from atomic scientists urging him to first demonstrate the power of the weapon to the Japanese by exploding it in an uninhabited area. He heard his secretary of war Stimson compare the army's imprecise bombing and high civilian casualties to Nazi atrocities. On the very day he gave the order to drop the bomb, July 25, 1945, he wrote in his diary: "I have told the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. The target will be a purely military one."[1] However, the order contained no such language.

What signs do you see in this announcement of an effort to counter some of these concerns? How might Truman have shielded himself from recognizing some of the consequences of his decision?

Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of T.N.T. It had more than two thousand times the blast power of the British "Grand Slam" which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare.

The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet. With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces. In their present form these bombs are now in production and even more powerful forms are in development.

It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.

Before 1939, it was the accepted belief of scientists that it was theoretically possible to release atomic energy. But no one knew any practical

[1] Truman quoted in Robert H. Ferrell, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 55–56.

method of doing it. By 1942, however, we knew that the Germans were working feverishly to find a way to add atomic energy to the other engines of war with which they hoped to enslave the world. But they failed. We may be grateful to Providence that the Germans got the V-1's and the V-2's late and in limited quantities and even more grateful that they did not get the atomic bomb at all.

The battle of the laboratories held fateful risks for us as well as the battles of the air, land and sea, and we have now won the battle of the laboratories as we have won the other battles.

Beginning in 1940, before Pearl Harbor, scientific knowledge useful in war was pooled between the United States and Great Britain, and many priceless helps to our victories have come from that arrangement. Under that general policy the research on the atomic bomb was begun. With American and British scientists working together we entered the race of discovery against the Germans.

The United States had available the large number of scientists of distinction in the many needed areas of knowledge. It had the tremendous industrial and financial resources necessary for the project and they could be devoted to it without undue impairment of other vital war work. In the United States the laboratory work and the production plants, on which a substantial start had already been made, would be out of reach of enemy bombing, while at that time Britain was exposed to constant air attack and was still threatened with the possibility of invasion. For these reasons Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt agreed that it was wise to carry on the project here. We now have two great plants and many lesser works devoted to the production of atomic power. Employment during peak construction numbered 125,000 and over 65,000 individuals are even now engaged in operating the plants. Many have worked there for two and a half years. Few know what they have been producing. They see great quantities of material coming in and they see nothing coming out of these plants, for the physical bulk of the explosive charge is exceedingly small. We have spent two billion dollars on the greatest scientific gamble in history—we won.

But the greatest marvel is not the size of the enterprise, its secrecy, or its cost, but the achievement of scientific brains in putting together the infinitely complex pieces of knowledge held by many men in different fields of science into a workable plan. And hardly less marvelous has been the capacity of industry to design, and of labor to operate, the machines and methods to do things never done before so that the brain children of many minds came forth in physical shape and performed as it was supposed to do. Both science and industry worked under the direction of the United States Army, which achieved a unique success in managing so diverse a problem in the advancement of knowledge in an amazingly short time. It is doubtful if such another combination could ever be got together in the world. What has been done is the greatest

achievement of organized science in history. It was done under high pressure and without failure.

We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city. We shall destroy their docks, their factories, and their communications. Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan's power to make war.

It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam.[2] Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum.[3] If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth. Behind this air attack will follow sea and land forces in such numbers and power as they have not yet seen and with the fighting skill of which they are already well aware.

The Secretary of War, who has kept in personal touch with all phases of this project, will immediately make public a statement giving further details.

His statement will give facts concerning the sites of Oak Ridge near Knoxville, Tennessee, and at Richland near Pasco, Washington, and an installation near Santa Fe, New Mexico. Although the workers at the sites have been making materials to be used in producing the greatest destructive force in history they have not themselves been in danger beyond that of many other occupations, for the utmost care has been taken of their safety.

The fact that we can release atomic energy ushers in a new era in man's understanding of nature's forces. Atomic energy may in the future supplement the power that now comes from coal, oil, and falling water, but at present it cannot be produced on a basis to compete with them commercially. Before that comes there must be a long period of intensive research.

It has never been the habit of the scientists of this country or the policy of the Government to withhold from the world scientific knowledge. Normally, therefore, everything about the work with atomic energy would be made public.

But under present circumstances it is not intended to divulge the technical processes of production or all the military applications, pending further examination of possible methods of protecting us and the rest of the world from the danger of sudden destruction. I shall recommend that the Congress of the United States consider promptly the establishment of an appropriate commission to control the production and use of atomic power within the United States. I shall give further consideration and make further recommendations to the Congress as to how atomic power can become a powerful and forceful influence towards the maintenance of world peace.

[2] Potsdam proclamation called for immediate unconditional surrender or "complete and utter destruction." [Ed.]

[3] Japan wanted the condition that it could keep the emperor (which the Allies later allowed). [Ed.]