

Truman Research Essay Packet

Original assignment and self-assessment by David Cutler. Both model essays were generated by GPT-6 Astra Medium at his request and are not student work.

Research Essay: Truman's Decision to Use Atomic Weapons

Due Date: Friday, May 29

Point Value: 80 points

Why This Assignment Matters

You've written several in-class essays this year, developing your skills in thesis writing, analysis, and historical argumentation under time pressure. **Now is the time to show what you can do when you have time to research, think deeply, draft, and revise.**

This is a take-home essay assignment, which means the expectations are higher. All of the skills we've practiced—clear thesis statements, topic sentences, analysis over summary, use of evidence—still apply. But now you also have time to:

- Find excellent sources and engage with them deeply
- Craft sophisticated arguments with nuance
- Revise your writing for clarity and precision
- Proofread carefully for spelling and grammar

I will be paying particularly close attention to the rubric and grading criteria. For a take-home essay, spelling, writing quality, and clarity absolutely count. You have the time to make this polished and excellent—use it.

The Assignment

Write a formal and thorough analysis of President Harry S. Truman's decision to use atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, effectively ending World War II. Use historical evidence, insight, and critical thinking to assess whether Truman's action was appropriate given the circumstances.

Length: 5-7 pages, double-spaced

Citations: Chicago style with footnotes throughout your essay

Research Requirements

Secondary Sources: 4 required

Secondary sources are works by historians and scholars analyzing historical events.

- **At least 4 scholarly secondary sources** (books by historians, academic articles, historical analyses)
- **Maximum 2** may be found online
- **At least 2** must be print books or academic journals

WARNING: Encyclopedias (including Wikipedia, Britannica, History.com, etc.) and any online information NOT written by a historian will receive **no credit** and will **deduct points from your score**. Use scholarly sources written by credentialed historians.

Primary Sources: 3 required

Primary sources are documents, accounts, or artifacts created during or immediately after the historical period you're studying.

- **3 primary sources** required (government documents, speeches, letters, memoirs, contemporary journalism, eyewitness accounts)
- **Maximum 1** may be found online
- **At least 2** must be print sources

Note on Fussell and Hersey:

- John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946) counts as a **primary source** (contemporary journalism/eyewitness account)
- Paul Fussell's "Thank God for the Atom Bomb" (1981) can count as **either** a primary source (personal wartime experience) **or** a secondary source (historical argument)—your choice

This gives you flexibility in meeting your source requirements.

Finding Sources: Go Beyond Google

If you want to impress me, move beyond sources found online. The best research happens in physical libraries, where you'll find incredibly rich resources that never make it onto the internet.

Talk to a librarian. Seriously. Librarians at Brimmer and May—and at your local public library—are experts at helping you find exactly what you need. Tell them your topic and they'll point you toward collections, archives, and books you'd never find on your own.

Search through the stacks. Once you find one good book, look at the books shelved around it. Browse. Pull things off the shelf. Flip through indexes. This is how real historians work, and you'll discover sources that will make your essay stand out.

Visit these places:

- The Brimmer and May library
- Your local public library (Boston Public Library, Newton Free Library, Brookline Public Library, etc.)
- University libraries if accessible (many allow high school students to visit)

The printed resources—scholarly books, published document collections, memoirs, historical journals—are incredibly rich and will give your essay depth that online sources alone cannot provide.

Essay Guidelines

Your essay must demonstrate historical thinking and analytical writing:

Thesis

Include a clear thesis statement in your introduction presenting your main argument about Truman's decision. This should be debatable, specific, and set the direction for your entire essay. Avoid vague claims—take a clear position supported by evidence.

Topic Sentences

Each paragraph should begin with a clear topic sentence that ties back to your thesis and outlines the main idea of the paragraph. Your reader should be able to follow your argument by reading your topic sentences alone.

Historical Context: Dates and Terms

Incorporate key dates and terms to provide historical context and support your analysis. Don't just drop in terms—explain their significance and why they matter to your argument. Examples might include: Potsdam Conference, Operation Downfall, unconditional surrender, Manhattan Project, casualty estimates, etc.

Significance

Delve into the significance of Truman's decision. Consider:

- How did it shape the course of World War II and the post-war world?
- What were the immediate military and strategic implications?
- What were the moral and ethical dimensions?
- What were the geopolitical consequences for the emerging Cold War?

Analysis Over Summary: "Meaty Paragraphs"

Each paragraph should be packed with analysis, evidence, and your interpretation. **Do not simply state facts or summarize what happened.** Instead:

- Explain what the evidence means
- Analyze why it matters to your argument
- Interpret competing perspectives or contradictory evidence
- Connect specific details to broader historical questions

A meaty paragraph doesn't just say "Truman believed X." It says "Truman believed X, as evidenced by [specific source], which suggests [your interpretation], and this matters because [connection to thesis]."

Academic Integrity: No AI Policy

You must complete this assignment entirely on your own. This means:

- **No AI writing tools** (ChatGPT, Claude, etc.) — not for drafting, not for ideas, not for outlining, not for anything
- **No AI editing tools** (Grammarly AI features, QuillBot, paraphrasing tools, etc.)
- **No AI feedback** unless you're sitting with me and we're using it together under my direct supervision

This is your opportunity to develop your own voice as a historian and writer. Engage with the sources yourself. Struggle with the ideas yourself. Write the sentences yourself. Revise your own work. The intellectual work—the confusion, the breakthroughs, the messy drafts, the revision—is where the real learning happens.

Basic spell-check is fine. Everything else should be your own thinking and writing.

If you're unsure whether a tool counts as AI, ask me first.

Grading Rubric: Final Paper (80 points total)

Thesis & Structure (20 points)

18-20: Thesis is sophisticated, specific, and arguable. Essay is excellently organized with strong topic sentences that clearly connect to the thesis. Smooth, logical flow from introduction through body paragraphs to conclusion.

15-17: Thesis is clear and specific. Essay is well-organized with clear topic sentences. Good logical flow with effective transitions between ideas.

12-14: Thesis is present but may be somewhat general or predictable. Organization is adequate but topic sentences may be weak or inconsistently connected to thesis. Some organizational issues or unclear flow.

9-11: Thesis is unclear, too broad, or merely descriptive. Weak organization with unclear or missing topic sentences. Poor logical flow between paragraphs.

Below 9: No clear thesis or severely disorganized essay.

Analysis Over Summary (25 points)

23-25: Consistently prioritizes interpretation and argument over description. Explains significance of all evidence. Engages meaningfully with complexity, nuance, and multiple perspectives. Makes sophisticated connections between evidence and larger historical/ethical questions.

20-22: Generally prioritizes analysis over summary. Explains significance of most evidence. Engages with some complexity and different perspectives. Makes clear connections to larger questions.

16-19: Mix of analysis and summary, with summary sometimes dominating. Explains significance of some evidence but not consistently. Limited engagement with complexity or alternative perspectives.

12-15: Primarily summary with minimal analysis. Presents evidence without explaining its significance. Little engagement with complexity or nuance.

Below 12: Almost entirely summary or description with no meaningful analysis.

Use of Sources (15 points)

14-15: Meets or exceeds source requirements with excellent choices. Sources are credible, diverse, and highly relevant. Evidence is seamlessly integrated and cited flawlessly (Chicago footnotes). Sources support rather than replace student's own analysis.

12-13: Meets all source requirements. Sources are credible and relevant. Evidence is well-integrated with only minor citation errors. Good balance between sources and student voice.

10-11: Meets most source requirements. Sources are generally appropriate but may lack diversity or depth. Some integration issues or citation errors. May rely too heavily on quotation over analysis.

7-9: Does not meet source requirements or sources are weak/inappropriate. Significant citation errors. Over-reliance on sources with little student analysis.

Below 7: Minimal sources, improperly cited, or plagiarized material.

Writing & Clarity (15 points)

14-15: Writing is clear, precise, and essentially error-free. Sophisticated vocabulary and sentence variety. Smooth, effective transitions throughout. Introduction effectively sets up the argument; conclusion synthesizes without repetition.

12-13: Writing is clear with only minor grammatical errors. Good vocabulary and sentence structure. Effective transitions. Solid introduction and conclusion.

10-11: Writing is generally clear but has noticeable errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Some awkward phrasing or repetitive sentence structure. Adequate introduction and conclusion.

7-9: Writing clarity is compromised by frequent errors. Weak vocabulary or confusing sentence structure. Introduction or conclusion is underdeveloped.

Below 7: Significant writing errors throughout that impede understanding.

Overall Effectiveness (5 points)

5: Essay demonstrates exceptional engagement with the material. Historical context is accurate and sophisticated. The piece reads as a cohesive, compelling argument. Shows intellectual risk-taking and impressive depth of thought.

4: Essay demonstrates strong engagement. Historical context is accurate and well-explained. Reads as a cohesive argument with good depth.

3: Essay demonstrates adequate engagement. Historical context is mostly accurate. Reasonably cohesive with some depth.

2: Essay demonstrates limited engagement. Historical context has some inaccuracies. Lacks cohesion or depth.

1: Minimal engagement or significant historical inaccuracies.

What Makes This an A+ Essay?

An exceptional essay will:

- Take an original, nuanced position (not just "it was right" or "it was wrong")
- Engage deeply with primary sources—what did people at the time know, believe, and argue?
- Grapple with the genuine complexity and moral weight of the decision
- Use evidence to build an argument, not just illustrate predetermined conclusions
- Demonstrate that you've wrestled with competing interpretations from historians
- Write with clarity, precision, and your own authentic voice
- Show that this question matters—historically and ethically

Submission Guidelines

Format:

- 5-6 pages, double-spaced
- 12-point font, Times New Roman or similar
- 1-inch margins
- Chicago-style footnotes
- Include a bibliography/works cited page (does not count toward page length)

Submit as:

- PDF or Word document
- Include your name and date on the first page
- Title your essay (something more interesting than "Truman Essay")

Timeline Reminder

- **Outline was due:** Sunday, April 27
- **Individual conferences:** Completed by early May
- **Final paper due:** Friday, May 16, 11:59 PM

You have had **three weeks** since the outline to research, draft, revise, and polish this essay. Use that time wisely.

Getting Help

I'm here to support you, but you need to reach out.

Come see me if you're stuck on your argument, struggling with sources, or need clarification on citations.

What I can help with:

- Clarifying the assignment
- Discussing your argument and how to strengthen it
- Pointing you toward research strategies
- Explaining Chicago citation format
- Answering questions about what counts as a good source

What I cannot do:

- Write your thesis for you
- Tell you whether your argument is "right" (there's no single right answer)
- Edit your draft line-by-line
- Do your research for you

Final Thoughts

This essay is your chance to demonstrate everything you've learned this year about historical thinking, research, and writing. Take it seriously. Engage with the complexity of Truman's decision. Let yourself struggle with the moral and strategic questions. Write something you're proud of.

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is one of the most consequential decisions in human history. Your essay should reflect the weight of that reality.

Good luck. I'm looking forward to reading your work.

OPTIONAL RESOURCES FROM MR. CUTLER'S FOLDER

[MatthewJones_2010_1IntheshadowofHiroshi_AfterHiroshimaTheUnit.pdf](#)

[Screenshot 2026-05-13 at 2.56.42 PM.png](#)

[THE_BOMBS_STILL_TICKING_Eighty.PDF](#)

[SamuelS.Kloda_2022_11.Truman'sAddresstot_TheAtomicBombinImages.pdf](#)

[Screenshot 2026-05-13 at 2.52.23 PM.png](#)

[SamuelS.Kloda_2022_8.ThePotsdamDeclarati_TheAtomicBombinImages.pdf](#)

[Why the atomic bombing of Hiroshima would be illegal today.pdf](#)

[Hiramoto_Thesis_TheFinal.docx](#)

[Bendheim_Senior_Thesis.pdf](#)

Victory Was Necessary; Two Atomic Bombings Were Not

Generated by GPT-6 Astra Medium

Japan's defeat in August 1945 made peace possible, but victory did not establish that destroying Hiroshima on August 6 and Nagasaki on August 9 was justified. Truman had to weigh continuing combat against a weapon whose immediate effects were catastrophic. That responsibility made rapid surrender a legitimate objective; it did not make speed the sole measure of sound policy. Hiroshima was strategically understandable but insufficiently justified because diplomatic alternatives remained untested and civilian destruction became a means of coercion. Nagasaki was less defensible still: the first bombing and Soviet intervention had transformed the situation without receiving adequate time for assessment. The central failure was therefore a failure to distinguish the ability to end the war through overwhelming violence from the necessity of employing that violence twice.

The strongest defense of the bomb began with lives that continued war would endanger. Combat veteran and literary scholar Paul Fussell recalled that soldiers "broke down and cried with relief and joy. We were going to live."¹ His final sentence made anticipated survival concrete, and critics must take that fear seriously. Yet testimony about relief cannot establish the outcome of an untried policy. Nuclear historian J. Samuel Walker distinguished accelerating

¹ Paul Fussell, "Thank God for the Atom Bomb" (supplied classroom handout, n.d.), 10; see also 2–3 and 9. Page numbers refer to the handout.

surrender from preventing an invasion, rejecting the assumption that these were identical achievements.² That distinction changes the comparison: Truman's choice cannot be reduced to two devastated cities against an inevitably slaughtered invading army. The relevant question is whether a shorter period of continued pressure, combined with clearer terms, offered a reasonable prospect of surrender at a lower human cost. Its uncertainty demanded evaluation, not dismissal.

The Potsdam Declaration allowed such clarification by separating Japan's existence from its military regime. The Allies declared, "We do not intend that the Japanese shall be enslaved as a race or destroyed as a nation."³ The stated objective was to dismantle militarism, not eradicate a people. Yet the declaration left the emperor's future uncertain. Researcher Katherine E. McKinney, political scientist Scott D. Sagan, and legal scholar Allen S. Weiner described Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson's unsuccessful effort to obtain earlier reassurance about the imperial institution.⁴ An assurance of continuity under Allied authority could have tested whether preservation of the dynasty would strengthen peace advocates. It need not have guaranteed unrestricted sovereignty or immunity from occupation. Truman therefore faced a diplomatic choice more precise than either unconditional destruction or surrender to Japanese demands.

That alternative deserved consideration without being mistaken for an assured peace agreement. Historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, a specialist in Russian and Japanese history, emphasized the distinction between retaining the emperor and preserving his sovereign

² J. Samuel Walker, "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground," *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 2 (2005): 327–28, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2005.00476.x>.

³ "Proclamation Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender," July 26, 1945, clause 10, reproduced in Samuel S. Kloda, *The Atomic Bomb in Images and Documents: The Manhattan Project and the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (McFarland, 2022), 69.

⁴ Katherine E. McKinney et al., "Why the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima Would Be Illegal Today," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 76, no. 4 (2020): 159–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2020.1778344>.

prerogatives; Japanese divisions also complicated any settlement.⁵ Nevertheless, the difficulty of negotiation cannot establish its futility. An explicit offer could have clarified which leaders sought institutional continuity and which insisted on conditions incompatible with disarmament. Even rejection would have supplied information about the need for further force. The objection that diplomacy might have failed is powerful only if every delay was demonstrably worse than immediate urban destruction. The evidence does not establish that. This argument rests on a duty to examine a plausible, less destructive course, rather than on certainty that changing one phrase would have ended the war.

Hiroshima's targeting imposed an especially demanding burden of justification because civilian deaths were integral to the weapon's intended psychological effect. McKinney, Sagan, and Weiner concluded that "killing large numbers of civilians was the primary purpose of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima."⁶ If civilians were deliberately exposed to destruction to change their government's behavior, describing the city's military facilities could not resolve the moral problem. The facilities established military value; they did not establish the legitimacy of every method used against the city. The authors' application of modern law cannot simply be projected backward onto 1945. Their targeting evidence nevertheless raises a historical question independent of that legal anachronism: did leaders treat civilian immunity as a constraint, or merely as an obstacle to maximizing shock?

The history of incendiary bombing helps explain why that constraint weakened, while Truman's announcement shows how public language reinforced the process. In his Columbia history thesis, Gilad Bendheim emphasized the "many contingent aspects" behind the turn

⁵ Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, "What Role Did the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Soviet Entry into the War Play in Japan's Decision to Surrender in the Pacific War? Conversations with Tsuyoshi Hasegawa," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 21, no. 10, article 1 (2023): 11–14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466023028681>.

⁶ McKinney et al., "Why the Atomic Bombing," 157–61.

toward urban attacks, including technology and organizational pressures.⁷ Such contingency matters because it restores agency: practices produced by decisions could also be reconsidered. Truman instead declared, “They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet.”⁸ The movement from Pearl Harbor to collective repayment blurred responsibility for aggression with exposure to punishment. A public statement cannot disclose every private motive, but it can show the justification offered to citizens. Here, revenge helped make destruction intelligible without explaining why particular civilians should bear its cost. Earlier firebombing made atomic attacks familiar in purpose; familiarity did not make them proportionate.

The interval between the attacks weakened the case for Nagasaki because new information should have altered the decision to continue. Hasegawa placed the crucial August 9 leadership meeting after Soviet intervention and before news of Nagasaki arrived.⁹ That sequence cannot prove that the second bomb was irrelevant, but it establishes that Japan’s decision-making was already responding to a transformed situation. Soviet entry threatened a military position and extinguished hopes of mediation through Moscow. The appropriate comparison on August 9 was therefore not simply the comparison available before Hiroshima. It included the possibility that two shocks already delivered could produce surrender if their effects were assessed. Treating the original authorization as sufficient for another attack discounted the value of information that a brief pause could have provided.

The strongest objection is that repetition itself may have been necessary to destroy confidence in continued resistance. Pacific War historian Richard B. Frank argued that Nagasaki

⁷ Gilad Bendheim, “Incendiary Wars: The Transformation of United States Air Force Bombing Policy in the WWII Pacific Theater” (senior thesis, Columbia University, n.d.), 6.

⁸ Harry S. Truman, statement announcing the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, August 6, 1945, excerpted in Kloda, *Atomic Bomb in Images and Documents*, 123.

⁹ Hasegawa, “What Role Did the Atomic Bombings,” 11–14.

undermined the belief that America lacked an arsenal capable of bypassing Japan's planned decisive battle.¹⁰ That gives the second attack a plausible strategic purpose, which a serious criticism must acknowledge. Purpose, however, is not proof that immediate execution was preferable to reassessment. Nuclear weapons historian Alex Wellerstein's account of Truman's August 10 halt to further atomic attacks demonstrates that continuation was subject to presidential intervention.¹¹ The issue is not whether Truman personally selected every operational detail. It is whether he adequately supervised a policy whose consequences changed after each use. A pause carried risks, but so did acting before understanding whether another city's destruction still offered an indispensable advantage.

Civilian testimony supplies evidence that strategic narratives tend to exclude because their endpoint is surrender. Journalist John Hersey's account of Toshiko Sasaki's injury and Dr. Terufumi Sasaki's overwhelmed medical work exposed the individual consequences behind the language of an urban target.¹² Those experiences did not reveal cabinet intentions; their evidentiary force concerned the cost of the chosen means. In oral historian Tomoko Hiramoto's research, survivor Tokuko Kimura asked, "Should I continue my story after the bombing? That is, if you have time."¹³ Her hesitation revealed how even sympathetic audiences could frame the bombing as a single event rather than the beginning of a damaged life. Together, the sources challenge an accounting that counts immediate deaths and then closes with surrender. Injury, interrupted relationships, and social exclusion belonged to the consequences of the decision too.

¹⁰ Richard B. Frank, "'To Bear the Unbearable': Japan's Surrender, Part II," National WWII Museum, August 20, 2020, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/japans-surrender-military-coup-1945>.

¹¹ Alex Wellerstein, "What Journalists Should Know about the Atomic Bombings," *Restricted Data* (blog), June 9, 2020, <https://blog.nuclearsecrecy.com/2020/06/09/what-journalists-should-know-about-the-atomic-bombings/>.

¹² John Hersey, "Hiroshima," *The New Yorker*, August 31, 1946, secs. 1–2, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1946/08/31/hiroshima>.

¹³ Tomoko Hiramoto, "Restoring Testimonies: Rediscovering the Individual & Unfolding Memory in Hibakusha Narratives" (master's thesis, Columbia University, 2019), introduction and chap. 1.

This does not mean that vivid testimony automatically defeats the argument from lives saved. Fussell's relief and Kimura's question both derived authority from experience, yet neither witness could calculate every consequence of an alternative policy. The analytical task is to preserve their different evidence without asking either to answer what the source cannot establish. Fussell explains why delay could be terrifying; Kimura explains why survival did not erase the bombing's harm.¹⁴ A defensible comparison must include both. The burden on a president authorizing mass civilian destruction should therefore exceed the observation that war itself was cruel. It should require a persuasive reason to believe that this particular escalation, at this particular moment, was preferable to practicable alternatives. The documentary uncertainty makes that burden harder to satisfy, even while preventing an absolute verdict about what would otherwise have happened.

The postwar consequences exposed a further limit of equating coercive success with sound statesmanship. International historian Matthew Jones identified "mounting distrust of the Soviet Union" as a force turning opinion against "forsaking the American nuclear monopoly."¹⁵ A weapon that appeared to guarantee security also made cooperation more difficult when surrendering exclusive control seemed dangerous. This does not establish that intimidating Moscow was the sole purpose of the attacks or that nuclear weapons alone caused the Cold War. It identifies a tension within the achievement: unprecedented military power could obstruct the political arrangements needed to make its future use less likely. Japan's surrender resolved an immediate military problem while leaving a new problem of international security. A judgment confined to August's battlefield outcome misses that wider responsibility.

¹⁴ Fussell, "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," 10; Hiramoto, "Restoring Testimonies," introduction.

¹⁵ Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945–1965* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11; see also 9–12.

Truman's decision should consequently be criticized without pretending that he possessed a painless alternative or perfect foresight. Japan's leaders bore responsibility for aggression and continued resistance; American troops and occupied populations had urgent claims to protection. Those truths justified determined efforts to end the war. They did not justify treating diplomatic uncertainty as evidence that negotiation was useless, military value as permission to devastate a population, or the first authorization as sufficient warrant for a second attack. Hiroshima remained compromised by the targeting and the failure to test a plausible alternative. Nagasaki added a failure to reassess after conditions changed. The necessary defeat of Japanese militarism should be distinguished from the asserted necessity of every act that preceded it. That distinction allows moral judgment without replacing history's uncertainty with a comforting inevitability.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Fussell, Paul. “Thank God for the Atom Bomb.” Supplied classroom handout. Publication date unresolved in this version. Used as retrospective testimony of a combat veteran.

Hersey, John. “Hiroshima.” *The New Yorker*, August 31, 1946.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1946/08/31/hiroshima>. Contemporary reporting based on survivor testimony.

“Proclamation Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender.” July 26, 1945. Reproduced in Samuel S. Kloda, *The Atomic Bomb in Images and Documents: The Manhattan Project and the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, 68–69. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2022.

Truman, Harry S. Statement announcing the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. August 6, 1945. Excerpted in Samuel S. Kloda, *The Atomic Bomb in Images and Documents: The Manhattan Project and the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, 123. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2022. Full official text:
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v06/d401>.

Historical scholarship and other analysis

Bendheim, Gilad. “Incendiary Wars: The Transformation of United States Air Force Bombing Policy in the WWII Pacific Theater.” Senior thesis, Columbia University, n.d.

Frank, Richard B. “‘To Bear the Unbearable’: Japan’s Surrender, Part II.” National WWII Museum, August 20, 2020.
<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/japans-surrender-military-coup-1945>.

Hasegawa, Tsuyoshi. “What Role Did the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Soviet Entry into the War Play in Japan’s Decision to Surrender in the Pacific War? Conversations with Tsuyoshi Hasegawa.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 21, no. 10, article 1 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466023028681>.

Hiramoto, Tomoko. “Restoring Testimonies: Rediscovering the Individual & Unfolding Memory in Hibakusha Narratives.” Master’s thesis, Columbia University, January 2019. Includes survivor interviews as well as methodological analysis.

Jones, Matthew. *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945–1965*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Chapter 1 supplied by the teacher. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511712197.002>.

McKinney, Katherine E., Scott D. Sagan, and Allen S. Weiner. “Why the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima Would Be Illegal Today.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 76, no. 4 (2020): 157–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2020.1778344>.

Walker, J. Samuel. “Recent Literature on Truman’s Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground.” *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 2 (April 2005): 311–34.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2005.00476.x>.

Wellerstein, Alex. “What Journalists Should Know about the Atomic Bombings.” *Restricted Data*. June 9, 2020.
<https://blog.nuclearsecrecy.com/2020/06/09/what-journalists-should-know-about-the-atomic-bombings/>.

Source note

Teacher exemplar generated by GPT-6 Astra Medium; not student work. Chicago shortened notes correspond to the full bibliography. All seven supplied files are used, with primary documents cited through Kloda’s collection. Quotations retain the supplied wording; Fussell’s inconsistent publication dating is left unresolved. Hersey’s accessible 1946 magazine text substitutes for the inaccessible Internet Archive scan. Digital consultation is not physical-library research; the assignment’s source-format limits and historian-qualification requirements still require teacher review. The essays make competing judgments from evidence, rather than claiming that either counterfactual outcome can be proved.

A Tragic Choice, a Defensible Decision

Generated by GPT-6 Astra Medium

Truman's use of atomic weapons was a defensible decision to end a war whose military outcome was clearer than its political conclusion. Japan could no longer win, but defeat did not automatically produce an enforceable surrender. American leaders still had to overcome resistance within a government and military that could continue imposing enormous costs. Hiroshima and Nagasaki offered a means of breaking that resistance without first carrying out the planned invasion. The justification rests on a reasonable judgment under uncertainty, not on an unverifiable claim that the bombs certainly saved a million lives. Both attacks can be defended as part of sustained coercion intended to secure capitulation, although Nagasaki's short interval after Hiroshima makes it the harder case. Their terrible civilian consequences require a tragic defense, rather than a triumphant one.

Continued fighting posed dangers beyond retrospective claims. Combat veteran and literary scholar Paul Fussell recalled soldiers who "broke down and cried with relief and joy. We were going to live."¹⁶ His memory cannot prove the necessity of the bomb, but it identifies a real obligation Truman bore toward people still exposed to combat. Wartime Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson's 1947 account described plans for intensified blockade and bombing, followed by invasion of Kyushu in November and Honshu in 1946.¹⁷ As a retrospective defense by a participant, it warrants scrutiny, especially its casualty estimates. Yet those alternatives mattered: withholding the atomic bomb did not mean withholding destructive force. The relevant choice

¹⁶ Paul Fussell, "Thank God for the Atom Bomb" (supplied classroom handout, n.d.), 10; see also 2–3 and 9. Page numbers refer to the handout.

¹⁷ Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1947, excerpt reproduced as "Stimson on the Bomb," Nuclear Museum, <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/key-documents/stimson-bomb/>.

involved competing ways of ending a continuing war. A defense of Truman must compare their probable costs, rather than compare atomic destruction with an imagined peace already secured.

Potsdam directed its terms against militarism rather than Japan's existence, giving coercion a legitimate political objective. The declaration promised that the Japanese would not be "enslaved as a race or destroyed as a nation."¹⁸ That commitment distinguished enforced disarmament from national annihilation. The absence of an explicit guarantee for the emperor was a diplomatic weakness, but it did not make the overall terms equivalent to extermination. Historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's distinction between preserving the dynasty and preserving imperial sovereignty also complicates the claim that one reassurance would necessarily have secured acceptance.¹⁹ Truman could reasonably insist that peace eliminate the military's ability to obstruct disarmament. An agreement preserving the forms of authority while leaving the machinery of resistance intact would not have fulfilled that responsibility.

The practical obstacle was securing obedience as well as agreement. Pacific War historian Richard B. Frank distinguished the political decision to surrender from military compliance and described naval leaders who doubted that the United States possessed additional powerful atomic bombs.²⁰ Their reaction matters because it explains how overwhelming material inferiority could coexist with continued resistance. If Hiroshima could be treated as an exceptional blow that would not recur, its destruction might fail to invalidate the remaining strategy. Conversely, repeated atomic attacks threatened to make that strategy irrelevant. Frank's disputed

¹⁸ "Proclamation Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender," July 26, 1945, clause 10, reproduced in Samuel S. Kloda, *The Atomic Bomb in Images and Documents: The Manhattan Project and the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (McFarland, 2022), 69.

¹⁹ Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, "What Role Did the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Soviet Entry into the War Play in Japan's Decision to Surrender in the Pacific War? Conversations with Tsuyoshi Hasegawa," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 21, no. 10, article 1 (2023): 11–14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466023028681>.

²⁰ Richard B. Frank, "'To Bear the Unbearable': Japan's Surrender, Part I," National WWII Museum, August 18, 2020, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/japans-surrender-part-i>.

interpretation identifies a causal mechanism beyond the observation that surrender followed bombing: atomic pressure could undermine the military reasoning through which leaders justified prolonging the war. The bomb's political effect depended on changing expectations, not simply adding another destroyed city.

Soviet intervention strengthens the explanation of surrender without necessarily displacing the atomic bomb from it. Hasegawa argued that Soviet entry destroyed Japan's hope of mediation and weighed heavily in the decision to stop fighting.²¹ That interpretation challenges any claim that American bombing acted alone. It does not establish that Soviet pressure would have secured equally rapid agreement and compliance without atomic attacks. The two shocks could operate together: one closed a diplomatic route, while the other threatened destruction that Japan's remaining defense could not prevent. Causal importance is not a prize only one event can win. For Truman, the existence of another pressure was a reason to expect greater leverage from combined force, unless there was persuasive evidence that further pressure had become unnecessary.

Nagasaki is defensible on that cumulative argument, although its timing deserves more skepticism than Hiroshima's. Frank argued that the second bomb discredited the belief that America lacked a usable arsenal and undermined Ketsu Go, Japan's plan to impose unacceptable losses in a decisive homeland battle.²² If American victory no longer required landing troops, threatening those troops became less effective bargaining leverage. This gives Nagasaki a distinct rationale rather than treating it as an automatic repetition. Critics correctly answer that a pause might have allowed surrender to emerge from Hiroshima and Soviet entry. Yet that

²¹ Hasegawa, "What Role Did the Atomic Bombings," 11–14.

²² Richard B. Frank, "'To Bear the Unbearable': Japan's Surrender, Part II," National WWII Museum, August 20, 2020, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/japans-surrender-military-coup-1945>.

possibility was not assurance of a functioning capitulation. Under continuing uncertainty, maintaining pressure could reasonably appear more likely to overcome obstruction than suspending it. This is a defense of a difficult risk judgment, not proof that the second city's destruction was historically indispensable.

The strongest moral objection—deliberately exposing civilians—cannot be answered by listing factories. Researcher Katherine E. McKinney, political scientist Scott D. Sagan, and legal scholar Allen S. Weiner concluded that “killing large numbers of civilians was the primary purpose of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.”²³ Their account challenges descriptions of civilian deaths as incidental. It should narrow the defense: Truman's choice cannot be vindicated as a clean military strike. Their conclusion about illegality today, however, applies a legal framework they distinguish from the less developed rules of 1945. Historical judgment must confront the targeting without confusing a modern legal conclusion with a contemporaneous ruling. A consequential defense remains possible if the attacks offered a reasonable prospect of ending still greater suffering; it remains morally costly because innocent people bore the instrument of that strategy.

That comparison must include the continued campaign against cities. In his Columbia history thesis, Gilad Bendheim emphasized the “many contingent aspects” that produced the turn toward incendiary attacks, rather than treating American bombing policy as predetermined.²⁴ Contingency means officials could have chosen differently; it does not mean their available alternatives had become humane. Continued conventional bombing and blockade could distribute death over a longer period while making it less dramatically visible. Stimson's account

²³ Katherine E. McKinney et al., “Why the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima Would Be Illegal Today,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 76, no. 4 (2020): 157–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2020.1778344>.

²⁴ Gilad Bendheim, “Incendiary Wars: The Transformation of United States Air Force Bombing Policy in the WWII Pacific Theater” (senior thesis, Columbia University, n.d.), 6.

of those planned pressures therefore matters even after its self-justifying purpose is acknowledged.²⁵ The defense is not that prior civilian killing licensed more killing. It is that abandoning one method required assessing what would replace it and how quickly that substitute could secure peace. The moral comparison must include the suffering imposed by waiting, rather than treating inaction on the atomic option as morally neutral.

Survivor testimony makes the cost of the defended choice impossible to abstract away. Journalist John Hersey's depiction of injured civilians and overwhelmed medical care exposed the gulf between ending a war and enduring an atomic attack.²⁶ In oral historian Tomoko Hiramoto's research, survivor Tokuko Kimura asked, "Should I continue my story after the bombing? That is, if you have time."²⁷ Her question insists that the consequences extended beyond the moment of destruction. A serious defense must count damaged lives alongside deaths and recognize that surrender did not restore what survivors lost. These sources do not establish when an alternative policy would have ended the war, but they raise the evidentiary burden for anyone claiming that the chosen policy minimized harm. They support a defense marked by responsibility to victims, rather than one that treats gratitude for peace as a demand that survivors accept their suffering.

Truman's own rhetoric sometimes fell below that standard, but a defective public justification need not invalidate every strategic reason for the decision. His August 6 statement declared, "They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet."²⁸ The collective language

²⁵ Stimson, "Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb."

²⁶ John Hersey, "Hiroshima," *The New Yorker*, August 31, 1946, secs. 1–2, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1946/08/31/hiroshima>.

²⁷ Tomoko Hiramoto, "Restoring Testimonies: Rediscovering the Individual & Unfolding Memory in Hibakusha Narratives" (master's thesis, Columbia University, 2019), introduction and chap. 1.

²⁸ Harry S. Truman, statement announcing the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, August 6, 1945, excerpted in Kloda, *Atomic Bomb in Images and Documents*, 123.

encouraged an equation between Japan's aggression and the punishment of its inhabitants. Civilians were not individually responsible for Pearl Harbor, and revenge cannot supply the ethical foundation for destroying them. Nevertheless, a public announcement combined persuasion, warning, and claims of military purpose; it was not a complete transcript of the decision process. The better defense must therefore reject the language of repayment while assessing whether continued pressure offered a reasonable route to enforceable surrender. Distinguishing those arguments strengthens the defense by preventing legitimate strategic concerns from becoming dependent on collective blame.

The Cold War consequences likewise complicate Truman's choice without automatically reversing its wartime justification. International historian Matthew Jones linked "mounting distrust of the Soviet Union" to resistance to "forsaking the American nuclear monopoly."²⁹ The bomb made security appear to depend on exclusive possession, a belief that could undermine cooperation over international control. That was a dangerous legacy, but possession itself and wider political conflict also shaped the problem; the attacks cannot bear the entire explanatory burden. Ending the Pacific war and constructing a stable nuclear order were related responsibilities, not identical decisions. Truman could reasonably employ a weapon to secure surrender while remaining responsible for reducing the dangers its existence created afterward. A defensible wartime choice did not authorize permanent reliance on nuclear coercion or excuse subsequent failures of diplomacy.

Ultimately, the case for Truman is strongest when it gives up certainty and acknowledges the force of the opposing evidence. Nuclear historian J. Samuel Walker's distinction between hastening surrender and avoiding invasion rules out an easy equation of the bombs with a fixed

²⁹ Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945–1965* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11; see also 9–12.

number of lives saved.³⁰ Even so, presidents must act before historians can reconstruct outcomes, and reasonable judgment does not require proof that every alternative would fail. Japan's unresolved resistance, the destructive character of continued conventional war, and the possibility that repeated shock would overcome obstruction made atomic pressure defensible. Nagasaki remains the more troubling decision because reassessment was possible, yet its contribution to discrediting continued resistance supplies a coherent justification. Both attacks can therefore be defended as tragic efforts to secure an enforceable peace, while their victims' suffering remains a permanent limit on any celebration of that achievement.

³⁰ J. Samuel Walker, "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground," *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 2 (2005): 327–28, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2005.00476.x>.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Fussell, Paul. “Thank God for the Atom Bomb.” Supplied classroom handout. Publication date unresolved in this version. Used as retrospective testimony of a combat veteran.

Hersey, John. “Hiroshima.” *The New Yorker*, August 31, 1946.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1946/08/31/hiroshima>. Contemporary reporting based on survivor testimony.

“Proclamation Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender.” July 26, 1945. Reproduced in Samuel S. Kloda, *The Atomic Bomb in Images and Documents: The Manhattan Project and the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, 68–69. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2022.

Stimson, Henry L. “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb.” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1947. Excerpt reproduced as “Stimson on the Bomb,” Nuclear Museum.
<https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/key-documents/stimson-bomb/>.

Truman, Harry S. Statement announcing the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. August 6, 1945. Excerpted in Samuel S. Kloda, *The Atomic Bomb in Images and Documents: The Manhattan Project and the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, 123. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2022. Full official text:
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v06/d401>.

Historical scholarship and other analysis

Bendheim, Gilad. “Incendiary Wars: The Transformation of United States Air Force Bombing Policy in the WWII Pacific Theater.” Senior thesis, Columbia University, n.d.

Frank, Richard B. “‘To Bear the Unbearable’: Japan’s Surrender, Part I.” National WWII Museum, August 18, 2020.
<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/japans-surrender-part-i>.

Frank, Richard B. “‘To Bear the Unbearable’: Japan’s Surrender, Part II.” National WWII Museum, August 20, 2020.
<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/japans-surrender-military-coup-1945>.

Hasegawa, Tsuyoshi. “What Role Did the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Soviet Entry into the War Play in Japan’s Decision to Surrender in the Pacific War? Conversations with Tsuyoshi Hasegawa.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 21, no. 10, article 1 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466023028681>.

Hiramoto, Tomoko. “Restoring Testimonies: Rediscovering the Individual & Unfolding Memory in Hibakusha Narratives.” Master’s thesis, Columbia University, January 2019. Includes survivor interviews as well as methodological analysis.

Jones, Matthew. *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945–1965*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Chapter 1 supplied by the teacher. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511712197.002>.

McKinney, Katherine E., Scott D. Sagan, and Allen S. Weiner. “Why the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima Would Be Illegal Today.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 76, no. 4 (2020): 157–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2020.1778344>.

Walker, J. Samuel. “Recent Literature on Truman’s Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground.” *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 2 (April 2005): 311–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2005.00476.x>.

Source note

Teacher exemplar generated by GPT-6 Astra Medium; not student work. Chicago shortened notes correspond to the full bibliography. All seven supplied files are used, with primary documents cited through Kloda’s collection. Quotations retain the supplied wording; Fussell’s inconsistent publication dating is left unresolved. Hersey’s accessible 1946 magazine text substitutes for the inaccessible Internet Archive scan. Digital consultation is not physical-library research; the assignment’s source-format limits and historian-qualification requirements still require teacher review. The essays make competing judgments from evidence, rather than claiming that either counterfactual outcome can be proved.

7.12 SUBMIT Research Essay Self-Assessment

Final Paper Self-Assessment

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

You’ve completed your final paper! Now it’s time to reflect on your work before our one-on-one conference.

Important: Instead of written feedback, I will meet with each of you individually to discuss your self-reflection and give you verbal feedback. This self-assessment will help you prepare for that conversation.

For each category below, identify which score range you think your paper falls into and explain why with specific examples from your paper. Be honest and specific—this is about genuine reflection, not grade justification.

1. Thesis & Structure (20 points)

18-20: Thesis is sophisticated, specific, and arguable. Essay is excellently organized with strong topic sentences that clearly connect to the thesis. Smooth, logical flow from introduction through body paragraphs to conclusion.

15-17: Thesis is clear and specific. Essay is well-organized with clear topic sentences. Good logical flow with effective transitions between ideas.

12-14: Thesis is present but may be somewhat general or predictable. Organization is adequate but topic sentences may be weak or inconsistently connected to thesis. Some organizational issues or unclear flow.

9-11: Thesis is unclear, too broad, or merely descriptive. Weak organization with unclear or missing topic sentences. Poor logical flow between paragraphs.

Below 9: No clear thesis or severely disorganized essay.

My self-assessed score: _____ / 20

Explanation (with specific examples from my paper):

One strength in this category:

One area for growth:

2. Analysis Over Summary (25 points)

23-25: Consistently prioritizes interpretation and argument over description. Explains significance of all evidence. Engages meaningfully with complexity, nuance, and multiple perspectives. Makes sophisticated connections between evidence and larger historical/ethical questions.

20-22: Generally prioritizes analysis over summary. Explains significance of most evidence. Engages with some complexity and different perspectives. Makes clear connections to larger questions.

16-19: Mix of analysis and summary, with summary sometimes dominating. Explains significance of some evidence but not consistently. Limited engagement with complexity or alternative perspectives.

12-15: Primarily summary with minimal analysis. Presents evidence without explaining its significance. Little engagement with complexity or nuance.

Below 12: Almost entirely summary or description with no meaningful analysis.

My self-assessed score: _____ / 25

Explanation (with specific examples from my paper):

One strength in this category:

One area for growth:

3. Use of Sources (15 points)

14-15: Meets or exceeds source requirements with excellent choices. Sources are credible, diverse, and highly relevant. Evidence is seamlessly integrated and cited flawlessly (Chicago footnotes). Sources support rather than replace student's own analysis.

12-13: Meets all source requirements. Sources are credible and relevant. Evidence is well-integrated with only minor citation errors. Good balance between sources and student voice.

10-11: Meets most source requirements. Sources are generally appropriate but may lack diversity or depth. Some integration issues or citation errors. May rely too heavily on quotation over analysis.

7-9: Does not meet source requirements or sources are weak/inappropriate. Significant citation errors. Over-reliance on sources with little student analysis.

Below 7: Minimal sources, improperly cited, or plagiarized material.

My self-assessed score: _____ / 15

Explanation (with specific examples from my paper):

One strength in this category:

One area for growth:

4. Writing & Clarity (15 points)

14-15: Writing is clear, precise, and essentially error-free. Sophisticated vocabulary and sentence variety. Smooth, effective transitions throughout. Introduction effectively sets up the argument; conclusion synthesizes without repetition.

12-13: Writing is clear with only minor grammatical errors. Good vocabulary and sentence structure. Effective transitions. Solid introduction and conclusion.

10-11: Writing is generally clear but has noticeable errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Some awkward phrasing or repetitive sentence structure. Adequate introduction and conclusion.

7-9: Writing clarity is compromised by frequent errors. Weak vocabulary or confusing sentence structure. Introduction or conclusion is underdeveloped.

Below 7: Significant writing errors throughout that impede understanding.

My self-assessed score: _____ / 15

Explanation (with specific examples from my paper):

One strength in this category:

One area for growth:

5. Overall Effectiveness (5 points)

5: Essay demonstrates exceptional engagement with the material. Historical context is accurate and sophisticated. The piece reads as a cohesive, compelling argument. Shows intellectual risk-taking and impressive depth of thought.

4: Essay demonstrates strong engagement. Historical context is accurate and well-explained. Reads as a cohesive argument with good depth.

3: Essay demonstrates adequate engagement. Historical context is mostly accurate. Reasonably cohesive with some depth.

2: Essay demonstrates limited engagement. Historical context has some inaccuracies. Lacks cohesion or depth.

1: Minimal engagement or significant historical inaccuracies.

My self-assessed score: ____ / 5

Explanation (with specific examples from my paper):

One strength in this category:

One area for growth:

Final Reflection

Total self-assessed score: _____ / 80

What did you learn through the process of writing this paper?

What are 1-2 specific questions or areas you want to discuss in your one-on-one conference?

Points: 80

Submitting: a text entry box or a file upload