

By July 1945 the war in Europe was over and the Allies had made enormous gains in the Pacific, albeit at a high cost of human life. One study by Secretary of War Henry Stimson estimated that attempts to invade Japan would cost at least half a million American deaths along with hundreds of thousands of Japanese deaths.

As the Allies drew closer to Japan, they began considering options to bring about a Japanese surrender. At roughly the same time the Potsdam Declaration was issued, demanding unconditional surrender and an end to the emperorship, the first US atomic bomb was tested. The Japanese were not told about this bomb. Here are a few contextual details relevant to the situation at the time:

- Some in the US and Britain were concerned about Soviet desires to expand Communism after the war and exert influence over new communist states. The Soviets were a big part of the peace process because they played such a large role in ending the war in Europe.
- The US began strategic bombings and incendiary bombings of Tokyo and other Japanese cities, especially industrial centers. The US began dropping leaflets over Japan warning of a massive bombing of "select cities" if they did not surrender. At least 350,000 died during incendiary bombings of 67 Japanese cities.
- In 1945 the Japanese government formed the Volunteer Fighting Corp. All citizens over 15 were required to train to defend Japan in case of attack.
- It appears that there were at least some in the Japanese government who were willing to negotiate, but it also appears that the government and military were divided.

**Source: Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Weapons, signed by the scientists of the Manhattan Project, June 16, 1945**

The initial use of the new weapon . . . in our opinion, should be such as to promote a satisfactory adjustment of our international relations. At the same time, we recognize our obligation to our nation to use the weapons to help save American lives in the Japanese war.

(1) To accomplish these ends we recommend that before the weapons are used not only Britain, but also Russia, France, and China be advised that we have made considerable progress in our work on atomic weapons, that these may be ready to use during the present war, and that we would welcome suggestions as to how we can cooperate in making this development contribute to improved international relations.

(2) The opinions of our scientific colleagues on the initial use of these weapons are not unanimous . . . . Those who advocate a purely technical demonstration would wish to outlaw the use of atomic weapons, and have feared that if we use the weapons now our position in future negotiations will be prejudiced. Others emphasize the opportunity of saving American lives by immediate military use, and believe that such use will improve the international prospects . . . . We find ourselves closer to these latter views; we can propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use.

**Source: Nuclear physicist and founding member of the Manhattan Project Leo Szilard's Petition to President Truman, July 17, 1945. The petition was signed by 70 other nuclear scientists but was never seen by the president.**

Until recently we have had to fear that the United States might be attacked by atomic bombs during this war and that her only defense might lie in a counterattack by the same means. Today, with the defeat of Germany, this danger is averted... The war has to be brought speedily to a successful conclusion and attacks by atomic bombs may very well be an effective method of warfare. We feel, however, that such attacks on Japan could not be justified, at least not unless the terms which will be imposed after the war on Japan were made public in detail and Japan were given an opportunity to surrender.

If such public announcement gave assurance to the Japanese that they could look forward to a life devoted to peaceful pursuits in their homeland and if Japan still refused to surrender our nation might then, in certain

circumstances, find itself forced to resort to the use of atomic bombs. Such a step, however, ought not to be made at any time without seriously considering the moral responsibilities which are involved.

The development of atomic power will provide nations with new means of destruction...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 purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale...The added material strength which this lead [developing the bomb first] gives to the United States brings with it the obligation of restraint, and if we were to violate this obligation, our moral position would be weakened in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes. It would then be more difficult for us to live up to our responsibility of bringing the unloosened forces of destruction under control.

Mr. Byrnes [a Truman advisor] did not argue that it was necessary to use the bomb against the cities of Japan in order to win the war. He knew all that time, as the rest of the Government knew, that Japan was essentially defeated and that we could win the war in another six months. At that time Mr. Byrnes was much concerned about the spreading of Russian influence in Europe.... Mr. Byrnes' concern about Russia I fully shared, but I did not share his view that our possessing and demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable in Europe. I could hardly imagine any premise more false and disastrous upon which to base our policy, and I was dismayed when a few weeks later I learned that he was to be our Secretary of State.

**Source: Harry S Truman, radio address (August 1945)**

The [atomic bomb's] production and its use were not lightly undertaken by this Government. But we knew that our enemies were on the search for it. We now know how close they were to finding it. And we know the disaster which would come to this nation, and to all peaceful nations, to all civilization, if they had found it first...We won the race of discovery against the Germans.

I had then set up a committee of top men and had asked them to study with great care the implications the new weapons might have for us. It was their recommendation that the bomb be used against the enemy as soon as it could be done...without specific warning... I had realized, of course, that an atomic bomb explosion would inflict [cause] damage and casualties beyond imagination. On the other hand, the scientific advisors of the committee reported... 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.

Having found the bomb, we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war...We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans...It occurred to me that a quarter of a million of our young manhood was worth a couple of Japanese cities and I still think they were and are...We picked a couple of cities where war work was the principle industry and dropped the bombs. Russia hurried in and that war ended.

**Source: Dwight D. Eisenhower, recollections of a July 1945 meeting with President Harry S Truman (1948)**

I voiced to him [Truman] 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 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."... I hated to see our country be the first to use such a weapon...

**Source: Memoirs of Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson (1947)**

The principal objective of the United States in the summer of 1945 was the prompt and complete surrender of Japan. Only the complete destruction of her military power could open the way to lasting peace....As we

understood it in July, there was a very strong possibility that the Japanese government would resist to the end...In such an event the Allies would be faced with the enormous task of destroying an armed force of five million men and five thousand suicide aircraft, belonging to a race which had already demonstrated its ability to fight literally to the death.

We estimated that if we should be forced to carry this plan to its conclusion, the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1946, at the earliest. I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties to American forces alone..

The decision to use the atomic bomb was a decision that brought death to over a hundred thousand Japanese...But this deliberate, premeditated destruction was our least abhorrent [awful] alternative...If the atomic bomb had not been used, it would have meant many more months of war and the needless suffering of many thousands and thousands of helpless men, women and children...It also made it wholly clear that we must never have another war.