Dropping Atomic Bombs on Japan: Different Perspectives

President Roosevelt died in April 1945 before the war ended and Vice President Harry Truman assumed the presidency. Though allies during the war, tensions grew between the United States and Soviet Union particularly as the war concluded in Europe with a divided continent (see maps).

The Soviets agreed to join the war against Japan three months after the conclusion of the war in Europe in May. But before the Soviet entry, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. In Hiroshima, 68,000 to 100,000 people died instantly and by 1950 the death toll reached 200,000. In Nagasaki, the bomb killed 60,000. Within a week, Japan surrendered.

Some view the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan as the first move in the Cold War because by using the bombs the United States kept the Soviet Union out of the post-war negotiations over Japan and thus eliminated any possibility of Japan being divided into Soviet and western blocs as Europe had been. Others saw Truman’s decision as a capitulation to the scientists and military who had developed the atomic bombs and wanted to use them. Truman explained his choice to use the bombs as one that saved a half a million American soldiers’ lives who would have been lost in a land assault on Japan. My father, a soldier on a ship in the Pacific headed to Japan after the end of fighting in Europe, finds Truman’s explanation a sound one. Historians who have examined documents available to Truman found no such estimate of 500,000 lives and some claim Truman invented the number as a post-war justification. Polls at the time indicated that 75 percent of Americans agreed with Truman’s decision.

Dropping the bombs began the Atomic Age. In 1949 when the Soviets successfully tested their own atomic bomb, the United States and the Soviet Union began decades of competing nuclear proliferation that placed the entire world at risk.

Different perspectives on the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan

Tale of Two Cities: The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1946) - This is a film produced by the United States War Department (later Department of Defense). Notice the emphasis on the bomb's impact on buildings and other infrastructure with no footage of radiation effects on people and only an ending warning about the Atomic Age. (12:03)


You can view images as well as video on the Hiroshima Archive Website sponsored by Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon
Finally, look at the English-language version of the [Website](#) of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in Japan.

The site offers a Virtual Museum with animations.

**Modern Controversy**

Nearly fifty years later, controversy over different perspectives on the dropping of the bombs raged anew in the United States when the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum announced plans to display the *Enola Gay* (the B-29 plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima) in a commemoration of the 50th anniversary with an exhibit at first called "The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War."

After veterans' groups criticized the plans vociferously, the Smithsonian revised the exhibit under a new title, "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II." More criticism followed and resulted in the Smithsonian canceling the exhibit and simply displaying the *Enola Gay* fuselage.

You can compare the different exhibit scripts on a [Website](#) hosted by the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, an anti-nuclear arms group.

Keep in mind that even the revised script (called "final draft") was rejected.

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