

HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI

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Harry Truman would, in less than 11 years, go from being a judge in Jackson County, Missouri, responsible for paving roads, to the White House, responsible for many of the most consequential decisions of the 20th century.

One of those decisions reached his desk April 25, 1945, less than two weeks after he was sworn in following Franklin Roosevelt's death. It was a memo that came from Henry Stimson, secretary of war.

"Within four months we shall in all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history. ... The world in its present state of moral advancement compared with its mechanical development would be eventually at the mercy of such a weapon. In other words, modern civilization might be completely destroyed."

The decision to use that weapon, first on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945, and three days later on Nagasaki, has been debated since.

Would the war have ended soon without the use of the bomb? Did Truman's decision to use the bomb save American as well as Japanese lives? Was Truman opening the door to a new, more powerful weapon capable of destroying civilization, or was it such a destructive weapon as to make future war unthinkable? How long could the United States remain the sole nation to possess such a weapon, and what would it mean for the world when that was no longer the case?

Stimson saw the day coming when other nations or groups would get their hands on their own atomic weapons, and he laid out the challenges ahead, warning Truman: "The control of this weapon will undoubtedly be a matter of the greatest difficulty."

Every president who followed Truman into the White House has wrestled with that difficulty.

Currently, nine nations have either acknowledged or are presumed to have Stimson's "terrible weapon," and many others have the technical capability to build one.

More nations seek nuclear weapons, and much of U.S. foreign policy and even the wars the nation risks — most recently with President Donald Trump's decision to bomb Iran — are driven by the desire to contain the spread of nuclear weapons.

Hanson Baldwin, of The New York Times, wrote on Aug. 7, 1945. "Yesterday, we clinched victory in the Pacific, but we sowed the whirlwind."

American war dead estimates

"In late July 1945, the War Department provided an estimate that the entire Downfall operations (the invasion of Japan's home islands) would cause between 1.7 to 4 million U.S. casualties, including 400-800,000 U.S. dead, and 5 to 10 million Japanese dead.... Other estimates in the U.S. government indicated U.S. deaths at 500,000 to 1 million. Which of these and other estimates would be the most accurate has been hotly debated over the years."

— Samuel J. Cox, director, Naval History and Heritage Command



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In this Sept. 7, 1945, photo, a man stands next to a tiled fireplace where a house once stood in Hiroshima, Japan. The Aug. 6, 1945, bombing was the world's first nuclear attack. An estimated 140,000 people, including those with radiation-related injuries and illnesses, died through Dec. 31, 1945. That was 40% of Hiroshima's population of 350,000 before the attack.

'Something terribly alive'

"At eight-fifteen and 15 seconds Little Boy falls away. (Paul) Tibbetts puts the plane into a violent, diving right turn. After 43 seconds the cockpit fills with a blinding light. A shock wave slaps the plane.... He looks back and sees a cloud boiling up toward the Enola Gay 'like something terribly alive' he will later recall. Down below, what was once Hiroshima looks like a seething bucket of black tar."

— Evan Thomas, "Road to Surrender"



AP FILE PHOTOS

ABOVE: Hiroshima, first enemy city to feel the American atomic bomb, is seen in this reconnaissance image made before the attack on Aug. 6, 1945. Large guns, tanks, machine and aircraft parts were reportedly manufactured in the city on the southwestern end of Honshu. BACKGROUND: In this Aug. 9, 1945, photo, a giant column of smoke rises more than 60,000 feet into the air, after the second atomic bomb ever used in warfare explodes over the Japanese port town of Nagasaki, dropped by the U.S. Army Air Force's B-29 plane "Bockscar."

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'Skin hung down like rugs'

"Most of the victims who had gathered there were junior high school girls from the Hiroshima Girls Business School and the Hiroshima Junior High School No. 1.

They had been mobilized to evacuate buildings and were outside when the bomb fell. Having been directly exposed to the heat rays, they were covered with blisters, the size of balls, on their backs, their faces, their shoulders and their arms. The blisters were starting to burst open and their skin hung down like rugs. Some of the children even have burns on the soles of their feet. They'd lost their shoes and run barefoot through the burning fire."

— Yoshito Matsushige, survivor, as reported by the Atomic Heritage Foundation

Japanese deaths

"How many people died as a result of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?"

"... The 'low' estimates are those derived from the estimates of the 1940s: around 70,000 dead at Hiroshima, and around 40,000 dead at Nagasaki, for 110,000 total dead. The 'high' estimates are those that derive from the 1977 re-estimation: around 140,000 dead at Hiroshima, and around 70,000 dead at Nagasaki, for a total of 210,000 total dead."

— Alex Wellerstein, Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, Aug. 4, 2020



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Hiromu Morishita, a survivor of the Hiroshima atomic bomb attack, shows a photograph of a young victim of the first nuclear bomb drop, in Sarajevo, on Oct. 28, 2004. Morishita, who as a 14-year old survived multiple burns, told the story of his city and himself to highlight the danger of nuclear weapons.

Radiation sickness

"As she dressed on the morning of Aug. 20... Mrs. (Hatsuyo), who had suffered no cuts or burns at all... began fixing her hair and noticed, after one stroke, that her comb carried with it a whole handful of hair; the second time, the same thing happened, so she stopped combing at once. But in the next three or four days her hair kept falling out of its own accord, until she was quite bald.... They were coming down with a strange, capricious disease which came later to be known as radiation sickness."

— John Hersey, "Hiroshima"

Memory

"What has kept the world safe from the bomb since 1945 has not been deterrence, in the sense of fear of specific weapons, so much as it's been memory. The memory of what happened at Hiroshima."

— John Hersey, author of "Hiroshima"



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Tourists view the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in front of a huge panel photo showing the destroyed city view of Hiroshima following the Aug. 6, 1945, atomic bombing in Hiroshima in this Aug. 5, 2006, photo.

AP FILE
The Atomic Bomb Dome is seen at dusk on Aug. 2, 2020, in Hiroshima, Japan. Aug. 6 will mark the 80th anniversary of the world's first nuclear attack.



Alfred Nobel's dream

Luis Walter Alvarez, a physicist, inventor and professor who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1968, joined the Manhattan Project during World War II. He witnessed the Trinity atomic test July 16, 1945, and on Aug. 6, 1945, served as a scientific observer on a B-29 Superfortress that flew alongside the Enola Gay that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

He then wrote a letter to his son describing the experience:

"The days of large bombing raids, with several hundred planes, are finished. A single plane disguised as a friendly transport can now wipe out a city.

"What regrets I have about being a party

to killing and maiming thousands of Japanese civilians this morning are tempered with the hope that this terrible weapon we have created may bring the countries of the world together and prevent further wars. Alfred Nobel thought that his invention of high explosives would have that effect, by making wars too terrible, but unfortunately it had just the opposite reaction. Our new destructive force is so many thousands of times worse that it may realize Nobel's dream."

— National Archives



Nobel