

The Atomic Bombs

Goal: Students will learn about the use of two atomic bombs against the Japanese in order to end the war in the Pacific.

Objectives:

- 1) Students will be able to describe the results of dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
- 2) Students will be able to list at least three factors that entered into the decision about whether or not to drop these bombs.
- 3) Students will examine their own feelings surrounding the use of atomic weapons to bring about the surrender of Japan.

As the Americans, fighting their way through what were Japanese-controlled islands in the South Pacific, came closer to the Japanese mainland, they found that the Japanese soldiers just seemed to fight harder. The battle for the island of Okinawa seemed an omen of things to come. This important battle was one of the costliest of the Pacific war. By its end, 12,500 Americans were dead and many more wounded. This battle, which was supposed to have taken 45 days, took 80.

Especially in light of the heavy loss of life in recent battles such as those at Iwo Jima and Okinawa, General MacArthur's prediction that one million American lives would be lost in an invasion of Japan seemed too much to bear. American strategists and military leaders felt that there must be another way to force the surrender of Japan that would not be so devastating to American troops.

President Truman, who had succeeded Roosevelt after his death, made the decision to use a powerful new weapon – the atomic bomb. The tremendous force of this bomb came from the energy created when radioactive atoms were split into smaller particles. Exploding the atomic bomb was like exploding 15,000 tons of dynamite. A bomber known as the Enola Gay dropped the first bomb over the city of Hiroshima on the morning of August 6, 1945. As a result, approximately 100,000 people died and an area approximately 4 mi. square was simply leveled. The U.S. Army selected Hiroshima as a target because it was the headquarters for the Second Japanese Army.

Three days later, another bomber dropped a second, even more powerful atomic bomb on the industrial city of Nagasaki. Nagasaki became a last-minute target when weather conditions did not allow planes to fly over the original target city of Kokura. An additional 40,000 people died in the Nagasaki blast. Those nearest the explosions simply vaporized, while survivors endured effects such as horrific burns, scars, and perhaps leukemia, a cancer caused by radiation. The Japanese Emperor Hirohito determined that his people could suffer no more. On August 14, 1945, the Japanese announced their surrender, and World War II officially came to a close the next day.

Exercises

The decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a very difficult

and emotional one. As a class, talk about the kinds of issues that Truman had to consider when making his decision (for example, predictions about the number of American lives that could be lost in an invasion of Japan, public pressure to end the war, financial costs of the war, effects on Japanese civilians and buildings, the results of testing the bomb in New Mexico, the inhumanity of using such a weapon, possible post-war consequences, etc.) Talk through the process of making a decision and allow students to express their opinions about using the bomb. Remind students that Truman did not have the benefit of hindsight as we do now. Have them predict whether or not Truman's decision would still be the same today, knowing the effects that the bombs had.