

An Examination of Whether World War II Could Have Ended Without the Atomic Bomb Being Dropped on Hiroshima.

Introduction

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 remains one of the most controversial decisions of the Second World War. The use of nuclear weapons against a civilian population raised immediate questions and has continued to generate debate. This essay will examine whether the bombing was justified as a means of ending the war in the Pacific. Advocates for the bombing argue that it hastened Japan's surrender and prevented the heavy casualties expected from a land invasion of the Japanese home island. Meanwhile, critics¹ maintain that Japan was already close to defeat and that alternative options, such as continued conventional bombing, were available. This essay will analyse the justification for the bombing of Hiroshima by examining military, political, and moral arguments made over time. It will consider the strategic situation facing the United States in mid-1945, the anticipated costs of invasion, and the impact of the bombing on civilian populations. By evaluating these perspectives, the essay aims to assess whether the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima can be considered justified within the context of the Second World War.

Research Question - Could World War II have ended without the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima?

Background to Hiroshima

By February 1945, the United States began its invasion of the island of Iwo Jima² as part of its island-hopping strategy in the Pacific, the capture of the island provided airfields from which fighter escorts could protect B-29 bombers on route to the Japanese mainland. On 1st April 1945, the first of the Japanese home islands, Okinawa³, was invaded. The battle resulted in severe casualties on both sides, with approximately 110,000⁴ Japanese soldiers were killed, and around 50,000⁵ Americans were killed, wounded, or went missing in action. Due to the intense resistance faced during the invasion, American planners feared that invading the main Japanese island of Kyushu could result in a devastating loss of life for both sides.

¹ Hibiki Yamaguchi, Fumihiko Yoshida, and Radomir Compel, 'Can the Atomic Bombings on Japan Be Justified? A Conversation with Dr. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 2.1 (2019), pp. 19–33, doi:10.1080/25751654.2019.1625112.

² Myles Hudson, *The Battle of Iwo Jima*, (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2025), <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Iwo-Jima>. [accessed 15 December 2025].

³ Allan C Bevilacqua USMC, 'Okinawa, 1945: The Bloodstained Heights of Shuri', *Leatherneck* (Quantico), 98.4 (2015), pp. 24–29 <<https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/okinawa-1945-bloodstained-heights-shuri/docview/1672175036/se-2?accountid=130472>>.

⁴ Bevilacqua USMC, 'Okinawa, 1945: The Bloodstained Heights of Shuri'.

⁵ Ibid.

What Happened

On 6 August 1945, at approximately 0815 hours, a United States B-29, named *Enola Gay* (Fig.1),⁶ took off from Tinian in the Mariana Islands in the Pacific, to drop the atomic bomb code-named 'Little Boy'⁷ on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The immediate effects of the detonation, as observed from the aircraft, included the formation of a distinctive mushroom cloud (Fig. 2).⁸ The impact on the ground from the 15-kiloton explosion caused an estimated 100,000⁹ fatalities, the majority of which were civilian, and which also caused widespread destruction of the city's infrastructure and landscape.(Fig.3)¹⁰



(Fig.1) B-29 Enola Gay



(Fig.2) The Mushroom Cloud.



(Fig.3) The devastated downtown of Hiroshima

⁶ United States Army Air Forces, *B-29 Enola Gay on Tinian Island*, 1945, photograph, The National WWII Museum, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/atomic-bomb-hiroshima> [accessed 16 December 2025].

⁷ Mark Clapson, 'The Conventional and Atomic Bombing of Japan', in *The Blitz Companion*, Aerial Warfare, Civilians and the City since 1911 (University of Westminster Press, 2019), pp. 97–118 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvggx2r2.11>.

⁸ Library of Congress, *The Mushroom Cloud*, 1945, photograph, The National WWII Museum, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/atomic-bomb-hiroshima> [accessed 16 December 2025].

⁹ Michael J Yavenditti, 'The American People and the Use of Atomic Bombs On Japan: The 1940s', *The Historian*, 36.2 (1974), pp. 224–47 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24443683>>.

¹⁰ National Archives, *The devastated downtown of Hiroshima*, 1945, photograph, The National WWII Museum, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/atomic-bomb-hiroshima> [accessed 16 December 2025].

The Primary Source

The primary source used in this essay is President Harry S. Truman's statement to the American people on 6 August 1945, which informed the nation of the attack and its rationale. The text was obtained from the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum website.¹¹

The statement was authorised for release by the President in Washington, D.C., through Secretary of War Henry Stimson¹² after the bomb had been detonated. President Truman was informed of the successful delivery of the device on 5 August while returning from the Potsdam Conference.

The statement's text offers several possible insights into the justifications for the United States' decision to use the weapon. President Truman states 'The Japanese began the War from the air at Pearl Harbour. They have been repaid manyfold,'¹³ which suggests that retribution for the attack on Pearl Harbour is presented as a possible justification for its use.

The statement 'with this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in the destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces,'¹⁴ can be interpreted as a warning not only to Japan but also to the Soviet Union, which was massing troops and equipment along the Manchurian border, still occupied by Japan. The statement does not mention the enormous casualties from the detonation or the Japanese position on their emperor remaining in position as a condition of surrender. This omission suggests that the statement was intended to justify the attack to the American public rather than to provide a complete or balanced account of the bomb's effects and of the possibility of Japan's emperor remaining as a condition of surrender.

Reasons for Bombing

Scholars and historians, such as Bruce Loeb¹⁵ have argued why the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima was a necessary action.

Most of the arguments centred on the potential loss of life among combatants on both sides and among Japanese civilians if the home islands were invaded. This was based on the casualty figures from the invasion of Okinawa¹⁶ in April 1945.

Estimates put forward at the time, according to Leob's article, were:

Using Admiral Leahy's "Okinawa formula" (correcting Leahy's numbers to a more correct 29-percent casualty figure) and considering an American force of 2.5 million for the invasion of Japan, American casualties would have been about 725,00 with about 200,00 dead. Figuring the "Okinawa formula" another way, if 120,000 Japanese soldiers killed 13,000 Americans on Okinawa, then 2.5 million Japanese soldiers on Kyushu and Honshu would kill about twenty-

¹¹ Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, *Statement by the President Announcing the Use of the Bomb at Hiroshima*, 6 August 1945, <<https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/93/statement-president-announcing-use-bomb-hiroshima>> [accessed 16 December 2025].

¹² 'Henry L. Stimson', Encyclopedia Britannica (16 October 2025)

<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-L-Stimson>> [accessed 16 December 2025].

¹³ Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, *Statement by the President Announcing the Use of the Bomb at Hiroshima*.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Bruce Loeb, 'Hiroshima & Nagasaki', *Commonweal* [sic] (New York), 122.14 (1995).

¹⁶ Bevilacqua USMC, 'Okinawa, 1945: The Bloodstained Heights of Shuri', *Leatherneck* (Quantico), 98.4 (2015), pp. 24-29.

one times as many Americans, or 270,000, with more than a million American casualties.¹⁷

However, these estimates have been disputed by historians, such as Rufus Miles, who wrote:

It is mystifying, therefore, that historians have not long ago exploded the demonstrable myth that those attacks probably saved half a million lives of American soldiers, sailors, and marines, and prevented numerous British fatalities and vast numbers of Japanese deaths.¹⁸

These differing arguments for the bombing of Hiroshima demonstrate that the rationale is not universally accepted and continues to be debated by historians.

Reasons against Bombing

The arguments against the use of the bomb have been ongoing since before it was dropped. General Curtis Lemay¹⁹ argued that continuing the incendiary bombing campaign²⁰ would have been enough to force the Japanese to surrender without the need for a costly invasion of the home islands, thereby making the atomic bomb unnecessary²¹.

Another reason advanced was the Soviet Union's entry into the conflict. Dr Tsuyoshi Hasegawa argued that their participation in the conflict would have been the tipping point for Japan to surrender:

In fact, the Operation Division of the Army General Staff, which had worked on the proclamation draft, thought the most effective means of forcing Japan's surrender was to time the issuance of the ultimatum to Japan so that it coincided with the initiation of Soviet entry into the war.²²

As Hasegawa confirms, 'the provision concerning the Soviet Union that had been in the draft proclamation was not included in the official document that was issued'.²³ The inclusion of this provision may have influenced the severely weakened Japanese to surrender, as they would have known that the Soviet Union was poised to enter the conflict.

Another argument is that the United States' rigid demand for unconditional surrender from the outset of the conflict necessitated the removal of the Japanese emperor,²⁴ this was a red line for the Japanese.

¹⁷ Loebs, 'Hiroshima & Nagasaki', p.18

¹⁸ Rufus E. Miles, 'Hiroshima: The Strange Myth of Half a Million American Lives Saved', *International Security*, 10.2 (1985), p. 121, doi:10.2307/2538830.

¹⁹ Air Force (2025) <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/106462/general-curtis-emerson-lemay/>, [accessed 22 December 2025].

²⁰ Victor D.Hanson, *Could WWII Have Ended Without Hiroshima*, [video]. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/vf06HRkZ9j4> [accessed 22 December 2025].

²¹ Victor D.Hanson, *The General Who Burned Japan Without Nukes*, [video], 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/T0KomZnYyGo> [accessed 23 December 2025].

²² Yamaguchi, Yoshida, and Compel, 'Can the Atomic Bombings on Japan Be Justified? A Conversation with Dr. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa', p22.

²³ Ibid., p23.

²⁴ Ibid., p22.

Robert Pape wrote, 'The United States never communicated any commitment to retain the emperor, or willingness to reduce any other demands'.²⁵

If the United States had committed to retaining the emperor, Japan would likely have surrendered.

Morality and Ethics

The dropping of the atomic bomb raises several moral and ethical questions that have been debated since 1945. It can be argued that the tremendous loss of civilian lives from this one act goes against the proportionality principle in Just War theory. The proportionality principle, when applied to the Hiroshima bombing, asks whether the level of violence used is justified by the loss of life, predominantly civilian, as well as the level of destruction. This must be weighed against the potential casualties that an invasion of the home islands would have caused, and the civilian death toll from the continued firebombing campaign, such as the 80,000 killed²⁶ in one raid on Tokyo.

From an ethical perspective, the loss of civilian life was disproportionate to the justification for its use. Still, it can be argued that, had it not been used, the potential number of casualties could have been far higher, and the conflict might have lasted much longer.

Consequences

Some of the immediate effects on the survivors of Hiroshima were severe radiation burns, homelessness, and blindness. These survivors came to be known as the 'Hibakusha'²⁷ they were shunned and discriminated against by other members of Japanese society.

The longer-term consequences of the bombing included high rates of cancer and ongoing radiation sickness.²⁸

The shock of the bombing of Hiroshima, as well as Nagasaki²⁹ on the 9th August 1945, led to an unprecedented radio broadcast by the emperor to his people on the 15th August 1945, in which he said:

Should we continue to fight, it would not only result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization.[sic]³⁰

²⁵ Robert A. Pape, 'Why Japan Surrendered', *International Security*, 18.2 (1993), p. 154, doi:10.2307/2539100.

²⁶ Sarah Paine, *Sarah Paine Explains The Brutality of American WW2 Bombing on Japan*, [video]2017, https://youtube.com/shorts/xKgkbt99d5U?si=XuktfSEzziRIF_Em [accessed 23 December 2025].

²⁷ 'After the Atomic Bomb: Hibakusha Tell Their Stories', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97.899 (2015), 2016/05/16 Edition, pp. 507–25, doi:10.1017/S1816383116000242.

²⁸ Evan B. Douple and others, 'Long-Term Radiation-Related Health Effects in a Unique Human Population: Lessons Learned from the Atomic Bomb Survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki', *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 5.S1 (2011), 2013/04/08 Edition, pp. S122–33, doi:10.1001/dmp.2011.21.

²⁹ Britannica Editors, atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (2025) <https://www.britannica.com/event/atomic-bombings-of-Hiroshima-and-Nagasaki> [accessed 23 December 2025]

³⁰ Richard J Shuster and Takuya Shimodaira, 'CONDITIONAL SURRENDER: Conflict Termination in the Pacific, 1945', *Naval War College Review* (Washington), 73.3 (2020), p.119.

There unconditional surrender took place on board the USS Missouri³¹ on the 2nd September 1945. This ceremony marked the end of the Second World War.

Conclusion

The use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima remains one of the most debated decisions of the Second World War. Supporters of the bombing argue that it was justified as a means to bring the war to a rapid end and to avoid the heavy casualties expected from an invasion of the Japanese home islands. These views were shaped by the fanatical fighting by the Japanese and the high losses experienced during battles such as Okinawa, which led the United States to believe that Japan would not unconditionally surrender.

However, the evidence presented in this essay suggests that alternative options were available. By mid-1945, Japan was in a severely weakened position, due to factors such as the continued firebombing campaign by General Lemay, the Soviet Union's imminent entry into the war after it had defeated Nazi Germany, and the possibility that changes to the United States' demand for unconditional surrender could have been sufficient to bring about surrender without the use of atomic weapons. In addition, the large number of civilian casualties from dropping the bomb and the long-term suffering caused by radiation raise serious moral and ethical concerns.

In response to the research question, it can be argued that the War in the Pacific, and therefore the Second World War, could have ended without the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. While the bombing played a significant role in ending the conflict, it was not the only factor, and its justification remains contested.

³¹ Shuster and Shimodaira, 'CONDITIONAL SURRENDER: Conflict Termination in the Pacific, 1945', p.138

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