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History of the Americas Paper 1

“The atomic bombs were necessary to end the Second World War.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?

The use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki is one of the most debated topics in history for good reason. This event caused much of the tension that was prevalent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the Cold War, while historians frequently debate about the slaughtering of human lives created by the destruction of cities. The official story present in speeches is that the bombs were only used as a last effort to end the Second World War, but analysis and historiography of the event reveals different root causes. It is far more likely that the bomb was not used to achieve world peace, as Japan was soon to surrender, but more likely used because of Truman’s inability to stop the momentum of the desire for the US to achieve superpower status.

Japan was no longer a military threat after 1944, as domestic policies shifted towards peace, such that America’s dropping of the bomb in August of 1945 was not due to a desire to merely end World War II. There was no longer a pressing defensive need for an invasion of Japan at this point in time. The previously stated goal of America to prevent fighting had already been achieved almost halfway through the Pacific campaign, yet the armed forces continued to fight. As the continued military campaigns led to the dropping of the atomic bomb, the motivation behind continued fighting is important to consider when exploring why America used atomic weapons.

There was no pressing American security need to continue fighting as opposed to seeking a diplomatic end to the Pacific theater. After the battle of Leyte’s Gulf, the single bloodiest day for the US Navy, the Japanese naval fleet was decimated. They no longer posed a threat to

invasion on the Western Coast of the United States. However, even though there was no effective offensive force, Japanese military still bitterly fought for defense. For example, the resistance at Okinawa resulted in massive losses for both sides. In addition, the Battle of Iwo Jima captured a strategically useless island at massive costs of human lives. The American forces were intimidated by the refusal of Japanese forces to surrender, and associated it with inherent Japanese aggression. Therefore, as the Pacific theater pushed on, lives kept on being lost, leading to increased American desire to use an “ultimate weapon”. However, American strategic objectives in regards to national security were satisfied after the Battle of Leyte’s Gulf, leading to the conclusion that subsequent fighting was mostly superfluous. As there was no need to keep fighting, continued aggression must be due to some desire other than simply ending World War II.

Internal Japanese politics were violently shifting towards a more moderate government due to horrific economic conditions, which would have resulted to an end of World War II regardless of American continued aggression. The war effort had burned through most of Japan’s resources, leading to famines, homelessness, and a depravity of basic necessities. There were protests and revolts against the government, led by moderate leaders. These new leaders were poised to take control of the government, and were at a position to sue for diplomatic peace. As Americans had intelligence of internal Japanese politics, these movements could not have possibly escaped their notice. However, it is true that this movement was made very slow due to Japanese culture and a continued allegiance to some of the warlords of Japan. Analysts at the Pentagon concluded that such a peace movement would have taken weeks, if not months or years. Although this may be reason to move towards increased aggression, as stated above, the Japanese military force was useless for invasion at this point, and were sitting ducks. Therefore,

continued invasions and the use of the atomic bombs were directed for a reason that is related to geopolitical timescales, not to end the Second World War or to achieve peace.

On the other hand, Truman had little power over major military decisions and was forced to carry out Franklin Delaney Roosevelt's legacy, resulting in an unjustified decision in regards to the atomic bomb with the primary motivation of achieving total victory. The final decision of the use of atomic weapons was handed to Truman, but he did not actually have the knowledge to fully carry out a decision. Instead, he was heavily influenced by his own ignorance as well as by the effect of other advisors and committees. Therefore, his stated objective of using the atomic bomb as a result of his own reflection in regards to preserving American lives is hollow and more accurately reflects the propaganda of the time. Instead, his actions – and inactions – show that the currents of American politics led him to make hard decisions in order to preserve FDR's legacy and to achieve total victory.

Truman had very limited knowledge and political capital after FDR's death, where there was already momentum to ensure total victory for the US by using the atomic bomb. Franklin D. Roosevelt's death came as a shock to the American political system, and forced an unexperienced and unknowledgeable man into the most powerful position in the world. However, Truman did not get all of the respect that he deserved. Prior to becoming president, Truman was largely kept in the dark in regards to major military decisions and even the existence of the Manhattan Project. He was mostly left out of important meetings and decisions in earlier war years. This implies that he did not fully understand the situation of the Pacific Theater in August of 1945. Because it was too late to carefully consider all of the facts, he was forced to rely more on others and the decisions of advisors, rather than reaching a reasonable decision on his own. Another argument may be that Truman was aware of the momentum of FDR's plan and

purposely chose to carry it out in order to establish his own legitimacy as president. By continuing the previous president's promises and legacy, he began to craft his own image as a strong president in his own right.

Advisors and committee had momentum from FDR's presidency to continue policies of total victory through the use of the bomb. As most of FDR's advisors still remained in the White House, there was a strong sense that these advisors had the blessing of FDR to carry out his will for the American people. Therefore, most of those advisors advocated dropping the atomic bomb, to achieve Roosevelt's goal of total victory. In addition, committees of scientists and other key political players also advocated for dropping the atomic bomb for their own purposes. For instance, many analysts in the Pentagon urged to drop the atomic bomb, to justify the cost of the atomic bomb. They knew that the cost of Little Boy and Fat Man was nearly 20 billion US dollars, or roughly 13% of all the money spent on the war effort. Therefore, to not use this weapon would have resulted in a massive waste of American resources. Other advisors, such as Secretary of State James Byrnes, saw the atomic bomb as a tool of diplomacy. In order to raise America to superpower status, he understood that the atomic bomb must be used to intimidate other countries. Although there were many different reasons for dropping the atomic bomb, most advisors did not believe that it was necessary to end the war, but that it was necessary to achieve other American policy goals.

Tense geopolitical conditions and an eagerness to secure superpower status were the prime motives for dropping the atomic bomb, in stark contrast to the stated goal of achieving world peace. The conclusion of World War II on the European front already led to the creation of the post-war environment, and analysts were already considering how to shape the world in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The use of the atomic bomb was therefore just a way to continue

American foreign policies, which is very different than the stated goal of being necessary to end the Second World War.

Dropping the bomb was primarily due to the geopolitical climate in response to Soviet troop movements, not to end World War II. After the \_\_\_ conference, Stalin promised to enter the Pacific theater “within \_\_\_ months”, but at that point, America did not necessarily desire USSR influence. This point was specifically illustrated at Potsdam when Roosevelt privately indicated to Churchill that there was no longer a need for Russian troops. It is highly likely that given the cost of American lives, the US desired a total victory made only in their name, in order to justify the deaths of \_\_\_ American soldiers. This influence would therefore imply that America needed Japan to surrender before Russia became involved, which provided a very immediate deadline to the Pacific Theater. Evidence that the US was opposed to a slow, deliberate surrender supports this claim of America’s intents. In addition, because the Japanese would have surrendered in several months regardless of the bomb, the American decision must have been motivated by forces outside of a desire for peace. This geopolitical alternative is the most likely reason for most of the decisions made.

In addition, America was eager to display its new power in order to secure the status of superpower nation after the Second World War, which is not connected to the wish to end the war. After the depression of the 1930s, America was emerging out of the cocoon of isolationism and was more ready to move towards being an international power. One of the primary ways to establish hegemony is to emerge with a more powerful weapon that no one had ever seen before. Committee members believed that the development of such technology was something to be proud of, and was eager to display it in a dazzling show of force. The fact that most of the committee members wanted to use the bomb on land other than population centers reveals a

desire not to force an end to the war, but to intimidate countries around the world of America's new power.

In conclusion, the decision behind using nuclear weapons in Japan is considerably more varied and deep than simply ending World War II. There are a myriad of viewpoints and opinions to consider when analyzing such an important decision in US history. From contrasting the actions of the United States with diplomatic intentions, it is evident that the atomic bombs were not necessarily used to end the Second World War, and were instead used to achieve different foreign policy goals and objectives. The weakening Japanese position as well as Truman's inability to stop nationalistic tendencies led to this bombing, effectively ending one war while sparking another.