INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the first successful atomic bomb test in July 1945, President Harry S. Truman wrote in his diary that “this atomic bomb . . . seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful.” The president’s conflicted feelings about the bomb captured the divergent poles in a debate that has raged since he authorized its use against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. While some historians contend that the use of atomic weapons saved American and Japanese lives by speeding the war’s end, others maintain that the bombs were neither necessary nor justified since other means may have been available to end the war. In this lesson, students engage in this debate by examining primary and secondary source materials—and the evidence contained within them—in order to determine which interpretation of the decision to use atomic bombs they find most convincing.

OBJECTIVE

By analyzing a range of primary and secondary source materials, students will develop an interpretation of the US use of atomic weapons against Japan and provide evidence to support their conclusion.

GRADE LEVEL

7–12

TIME REQUIREMENT

1–2 class periods

MATERIALS

This lesson plan uses evidence strips included as inserts with the printed guide and online at ww2classroom.org.

ONLINE RESOURCES

www2classroom.org

- The primary source images and evidence strips referenced in this lesson plan are available online.
- Lawrence Johnston Oral History
- The Bomb Video
- Operation Downfall Map
- Recording of Harry S. Truman’s Atomic Bomb Address, August 9, 1945
STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8
Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author’s claims.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9
Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

CONTENT ERA 8, STANDARD 3B
The student is able to evaluate the decision to employ nuclear weapons against Japan and assess later controversies over the decision.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 3
The student is able to compare competing historical narratives and evaluate major debates among historians concerning alternative interpretations of the past.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 4
The student is able to support interpretations with historical evidence in order to construct closely reasoned arguments rather than facile opinions.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 4
The student is able to interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created; testing the data source for its credibility, authority, authenticity, internal consistency, and completeness; and detecting and evaluating bias, distortion, and propaganda by omission, suppression, or invention of facts.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 5
The student is able to evaluate alternative courses of action, keeping in mind the information available at the time, in terms of ethical considerations, the interests of those affected by the decision, and the long-and short-term consequences of each.
PROCEDURE

1. Use the **Overview Essay** to introduce your students to the US development and use of atomic weapons and to the debate among historians over the reasons for dropping the bombs, the alternatives that existed at the time, and whether the bombs were necessary to end the war.

2. Introduce the two interpretations from historians Sadao Asada and Barton Bernstein regarding the use of atomic weapons during World War II (page 87), informing students that they will be examining multiple primary and secondary sources in order to determine which interpretation they find most convincing. As you introduce the interpretations, have students identify the similarities and differences between them and clarify difficult vocabulary.

3. Distribute copies of the **Evidence Collection Worksheets** (pages 91–92) to students and explain that they will use the worksheets to gather and organize evidence according to the interpretation that the evidence best supports. Inform students that they will also be responsible for explaining how individual pieces of evidence support a particular interpretation. You may need to give each student multiple copies of the worksheet.

4. Divide the class into groups and distribute one set of the **images** (pages 88–90 and online at www2classroom.org) and the **evidence strips** (available as an insert with the printed guide and at www2classroom.org) to each group. Alternatively, you may want to have students work in pairs, assigning each pair a single evidence strip or image to examine and discuss before rotating to analyze additional sources.

5. Instruct students to assign each image and evidence strip to at least one interpretation and to record that evidence and an explanation of how it supports the interpretation on the appropriate **Evidence Collection Worksheet**. Remind students to be attentive to the date, origin, and type of each source they are examining and to consider how those features affect the source’s reliability. To model this exercise, you may want to highlight evidence from one of the strips and/or images that supports each interpretation and provide explanations for each of those pieces of evidence before students practice independently.

6. After students have assigned each source to an interpretation, have them identify the interpretation for which they have compiled the most convincing supporting evidence and explanations.

7. Have students engage in a historical debate about their preferred interpretations, drawing upon the evidence they gathered to support their claims.

ASSESSMENT

You will be able to assess students’ understanding of the relevant standards through the notes they take on their Evidence Collection Worksheets, their discussion, and their homework assignment.

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

- For homework, have students write a 250-word text panel for a museum display about the US use of atomic bombs during World War II. Emphasize to students that, given space limitations, they will need to choose an argument or point of view in order to frame their narrative.

- Have students learn more about the atomic bombs through the oral histories and photographs that are part of the Museum’s Digital Collections. Students can find relevant oral histories and photographs by searching the Collections at http://www.ww2online.org/advanced and entering either “atomic bomb,” “Hiroshima,” or “Nagasaki” in the search field. Of particular note are the photos of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the bombing as well as the oral-history interviews with **Enola Gay** navigator Theodore “Dutch” Van Kirk and Manhattan Project scientist Lawrence Johnston. An excerpt from Johnston’s interview is also included in the online materials accompanying this curriculum volume.
EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

- In order to have students explore the ethical dimensions of the atomic bombs and the responsibility of historians to weigh ethical considerations when interpreting the past, ask them to compare the following statements:

“I was a twenty-one-year-old second lieutenant of infantry leading a rifle platoon . . . When the atom bombs were dropped and news began to circulate that ‘operation Olympic’ would not, after all, be necessary, when we learned to our astonishment that we would not be obliged in a few months to rush up the beaches near Tokyo assault-firing while being machine-gunned, mortared, shelled, for all the practiced phlegm of our tough facades we broke down and cried with relief and joy. We were going to live. We were going to grow to adulthood after all. The killing was all going to be over, and peace was actually going to be the state of things.”


“A year after the bomb was dropped, Miss Sasaki was a cripple; Mrs. Nakamura was destitute; Father Kleinsorge was back in the hospital; Dr. Sasaki was not capable of the work he once could do; Dr. Fujii had lost the thirty-room hospital it took him many years to acquire, and had no prospects of rebuilding it; Mr. Tanimoto’s church had been ruined and he no longer had his exceptional vitality. The lives of these six people, who were among the luckiest in Hiroshima, would never be the same. What they thought of their experiences and of the use of the atomic bomb was, of course, not unanimous. One feeling they did seem to share, however, was a curious kind of elated community spirit, something like that of the Londoners after the blitz—a pride in the way they and their fellow-survivors had stood up to a dreadful ordeal.”

John Hersey, Hiroshima (1946).

“War has grown steadily more barbarous, more destructive, more debased. Now, with the release of atomic energy, man’s ability to destroy himself is nearly complete.”

TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ATOMIC BOMB

INTERPRETATION 1

“This essay suggests that, given the intransigence of the Japanese military, there were few ‘missed opportunities’ for earlier peace, and that the alternatives available to President Truman in the summer of 1945 were limited. In the end, Japan needed ‘external pressure’ in the form of the atomic bombs for its government to decide to surrender.”


INTERPRETATION 2

“The choices for the Truman administration in 1945 were not simply the A-bomb versus invasion, or even the A-bomb and invasion. There were other strategies, both diplomatic and military, that the administration—had it desired—might have chosen instead of the atomic bombing. It was important to realize that the administration had felt no desire to avoid using the A-bomb and thus did not seek ways by early August to end the war without the atomic bombing.”


Returning from the Potsdam Conference, President Harry S. Truman prepares his “report to the nation” aboard the USS Augusta, August 6, 1945.

(Image: United States Army Signal Corps, Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, 63-1453-47.)
Osaka, Japan, following American firebombing, June 1, 1945.

(Image: National Archives and Records Administration, 352-HP-34-1777.)
This map of Japan shows the principal industrial cities which were burned out by B-29 incendiary attacks. Figures indicate what percent of the city was destroyed. For comparison, each city is paired with a US city of approximately the same size.

This map, produced after the war, shows the extent of the damage inflicted upon Japanese cities as a result of US B-29 firebomb attacks. For comparison, each Japanese city is paired with a US city of approximately the same size.

(Image: Office of War Information.)
As the United States prepared for Operation Downfall, the largest amphibious operation ever planned, Japan initiated a massive troop buildup to defend its home islands.

(Image: The National WWII Museum.)
INTERPRETATION 1

Directions: For each primary or secondary source that you examine, record any evidence that you believe supports the interpretation below. For each piece of evidence you record, write a brief explanation of how or why it supports the interpretation. Ask for an additional copy of this sheet if you run out of space.

Interpretation: “This essay suggests that, given the intransigence of the Japanese military, there were few ‘missed opportunities’ for earlier peace and that the alternatives available to President Truman in the summer of 1945 were limited. In the end, Japan needed ‘external pressure’ in the form of the atomic bombs for its government to decide to surrender.”


EVIDENCE

1:
Explanation:

2:
Explanation:

3:
Explanation:

4:
Explanation:

5:
Explanation:
INTERPRETATION 2

Directions: For each primary or secondary source that you examine, record any evidence that you believe supports the interpretation below. For each piece of evidence you record, write a brief explanation of how or why it supports the interpretation. Ask for an additional copy of this sheet if you run out of space.

Interpretation: “The choices for the Truman administration in 1945 were not simply the A-bomb versus invasion, or even the A-bomb and invasion. There were other strategies, both diplomatic and military, that the administration—had it desired—might have chosen instead of the atomic bombing. It was important to realize that the administration had felt no desire to avoid using the A-bomb and thus did not seek ways by early August to end the war without the atomic bombing.”


EVIDENCE

1: Explanation:

2: Explanation:

3: Explanation:

4: Explanation:

5: Explanation:
“Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, it is the Survey’s opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.”


“Contrary to the conclusions in the [US Strategic] Bombing Survey’s two major 1946 reports, for example, Prince Konoe Fumimaro had stated in his postwar interrogation with the Survey that the war would probably have gone on throughout 1945 if the atomic bomb had not been dropped on Japan. In his own postwar interrogation, Premier Suzuki had also indicated that the atomic bombing made an important difference in ending the war, and only after some coaxing by Survey questioners had Privy Seal Kido Koichi given the testimony suggesting that the atomic bomb was unnecessary.”


“[T]he atomic bombs and the Soviet entry into the war are, in a sense, gifts from the gods. This way we don’t have to say that we quit the war because of domestic circumstances.”

Japanese Navy Minister Yonai Mitumasa to Admiral Takagi Sokichi, August 12, 1945.
“His Majesty the Emperor is greatly concerned over the daily increasing calamities and sacrifices faced by the citizens of the various belligerent countries in this present war, and it is His Majesty's heart’s desire to see the swift termination of the war. In the Greater East Asia War, however, as long as America and England insist on unconditional surrender, our country has no alternative but to see it through in an all-out effort for the sake of survival and the honor of the homeland.”

Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Shigenori Togo to Japanese Ambassador to the Soviet Union Naotake Sato, July 12, 1945; intercepted and decoded by the United States on July 13 and shared with top officials, including President Harry S. Truman.

“[Stalin]’ll be in the Jap War on August 15th. Fini Japs when that comes about.”

President Harry S. Truman, diary entry, July 17, 1945.

“[The atomic bomb] saved hundreds of thousands of casualties on the beaches of Japan. It was also delivered on time so that there was no necessity for any concessions to Russia at the end of the war. It was on time in the sense that after the war we had the principal deterrent that prevented Russia from sweeping over Europe after we demobilized. It is one of the most magnificent performances of history in any development to have that thing on time.”

“Those insisting that Japan’s surrender could have been procured without recourse to atomic bombs cannot point to any credible supporting evidence from the eight men who effectively controlled Japan’s destiny: the six members of the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War, the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Kido, and the Emperor. Not only has no relevant document been recovered from the wartime period, but none of them, even as they faced potential death sentences in war-crimes trials, testified that Japan would have surrendered earlier upon an offer of modified terms, coupled to Soviet intervention or some other combination of events, excluding the use of atomic bombs.”


“In a careful analysis of Japanese records between August 6 and August 17, the historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa found only two statements (out of twelve) referring to the impact of the bombs alone; the rest emphasized both the bombs and Soviet entry, or Soviet action alone. In Hasegawa’s own estimation, the Soviet entry rather than atomic bombs was the determining factor forcing Japan’s hand.”


“Would you favor or oppose using poison gas against the Japanese if doing so would reduce the number of American soldiers who are killed and wounded?”

Favor .................. 40%
Oppose .................. 49%
No opinion ............ 11%

“A majority of young people favor the use of poison gas, while persons 50 years and older are substantially opposed to the idea. Men oppose the idea of using gas to a greater extent than women, and college-trained people are more opposed than people with no more than an elementary school education.”
“We believe that these considerations make the use of nuclear bombs for an early unannounced
attack against Japan inadvisable. If the United States were to be the first to release this new means of
indiscriminate destruction upon mankind, she would sacrifice public support throughout the world,
precipitate the race for armaments, and prejudice the possibility of reaching an international agreement
on the future control of such weapons.

“Much more favorable conditions for the eventual achievement of such an agreement could be created
if nuclear bombs were first revealed to the world by a demonstration in an appropriately selected
uninhabited area.”

The Franck Report, submitted to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, June 11, 1945, by James Franck and six other Manhattan Project scientists
tasked with examining the bomb’s social and political implications.

“The opinions of our scientific colleagues on the initial use of these weapons are not unanimous: they
range from the proposal of a purely technical demonstration to that of the military application best
designed to induce surrender…We find ourselves closer to these latter views; we can propose no
technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no acceptable alternative to direct
military use.”

“Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Arms,” June 16, 1945, submitted by Robert Oppenheimer and four
other Manhattan Project scientists to the Interim Committee, which advised President Truman on atomic weapons.

“The record of General MacArthur’s operation from 1 March 1944 through 1 May 1945 shows 13,742
US killed compared to 320,165 Japanese killed, or a ratio of 22:1.

“There is reason to believe that the first 30 days in Kyushu should not exceed the price we have paid for
Luzon [31,000 killed, wounded, or missing].”

Statement of General George C. Marshall to meeting of President Harry S. Truman, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Secretary of the Navy James
Forrestal, John J. McCloy, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 18, 1945.
“By August 2, [1945] the [Military Intelligence Service] reported three Japanese armies, eleven divisions, one brigade and one regiment on Kyushu. Total estimated Japanese strength stood at 545,000, including 445,000 ground-combat troops… By August 10, the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) of the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimated that by October 15, the Home Islands would house fifty-six field divisions (including three armored), fourteen depot divisions, and army troops with a combined strength of 2.6 million men. Of these Kyushu would be packed with 600,000 men in thirteen field divisions. In the final revision of this estimate on August 20, the total on Kyushu reached 625,000 men and fourteen field divisions. (This total was exactly correct as to field divisions, but the actual number of Japanese servicemen on Kyushu was much greater: 900,000.) At least nine of these divisions were in southern Kyushu, triple the original estimate, and the aggregate total of defenders far exceeded the 350,000 figure Marshall provided to Truman on June 18.”


“General Marshall told me that it might cost half a million American lives to force the enemy’s surrender on his home grounds.”


“We estimated that the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1946 at the earliest. I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties, to the American forces alone.”

“Anybody who really understands the history of that period has to conclude that it saved lives overall. Now, if you were living within the city of Hiroshima or the city of Nagasaki at that particular time, it is tough for you to accept that you gave your life or your father’s life or your parent’s life or whatever for the good of your country. But that’s what every soldier was doing—out fighting it—whether he was killed by a rifle bullet or an atomic blast. …There were a lot of people killed there, but they were killed for the overall good because many, many, many thousands of additional people would have been killed. Most of them would have been Japanese. And I’m not even talking in the event of an invasion.”


“The decisions made by Truman and his subordinates to add nuclear weapons to the campaign of blockade and bombardment cost the lives of between 100,000 and 200,000 Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on top of the many tens of thousands of others who died in the incendiary raids or due to the ultimate effects of the blockade. Those Japanese noncombatants, however, held no stronger right not to be slaughtered than did the vast numbers of Chinese and other Asian noncombatants, the Japanese noncombatants (not to mention Allied prisoners of war and civilian internees) who would have perished of starvation and disease in the final agony of the blockade. Thus, alternatives to the atomic bombs carried no guarantee that they would end the war or reduce the amount of human death and suffering.”


“Yet a very rough calculation suggests—given the soft data, no stronger verb than ‘suggest’ is acceptable—that a late August surrender, if achieved without the atomic bombings but with continued conventional bombings and the blockade, as well as the struggle on the Asian mainland and massive problems of malnutrition, might well have saved lives overall. In contrast, it seems quite likely that a very late October surrender, without the atomic bombings but with the conventional bombings and the blockade, as well as the struggle on the Asian mainland and massive problems of malnutrition, would have cost more lives, even if only Asian and not American and Soviet lives are counted.

Barton Bernstein, “Introducing the Interpretive Problems of Japan’s 1945 Surrender,” 15.
“The technical development of implements of violence has now reached the point where no political goal could conceivably correspond to their destructive potential or justify their actual use in armed conflict.”


“…Following are our terms. We will not deviate from them. There are no alternatives. We shall brook no delay…We call upon the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.”

Potsdam Declaration Calling for the Surrender of Japan, Approved by the Heads of Government of the United States, China, and Great Britain, July 26, 1945.

“I dwelt upon the tremendous cost in American life and to a smaller extent in British life if we enforced ‘unconditional surrender’ upon the Japanese. It was for [President Truman] to consider whether this might not be expressed in some other way, so that we got all the essentials for future peace and security, and yet left them some show of saving their military honour and some assurance of their national existence, after they had complied with all safeguards necessary for the conqueror. The President replied bitterly that he did not think the Japanese had any military honour after Pearl Harbour. I contented myself with saying that at any rate they had something for which they were ready to face certain death in very large numbers, and this might not be so important to us as it was to them. He then became quite sympathetic, and spoke, as had [US Secretary of War] Stimson, of the terrible responsibilities that rested upon him for the unlimited effusion of American blood.”