Background on the Atomic Bombing of Japan

Upon the death of Franklin Roosevelt in April 1945, Harry Truman ascended to the Presidency and was now the man responsible for bringing World War II to a victorious end for the United States. Within weeks of taking the oath of office, President Truman was briefed by Secretary of War Henry Stimson on the Manhattan Project, the code name used for the Atomic Bomb program. The program had been such a closely guarded secret that even during his time in the Senate and his brief three-month tenure as Vice-President, Truman had not known of its existence. Following a successful test of the atomic bomb in July, 1945, codenamed Trinity, Truman now had at his disposal the most destructive man-made force that had ever been created.

As springtime dawned upon the combatants of World War II in 1945, optimism ran high among the Allied nations that the war would soon come to an end. These hopes were in part realized by early May, as Berlin fell to the Soviet Army and victory in Europe had finally been achieved. With Germany now out of the picture, the United States could turn its full attention to the Pacific Theater, and a full-scale effort to defeat Emperor Hirohito and Japan. Despite suffering heavy battle casualties on the islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa in early 1945 and facing continued bombing on the mainland by American B-29 fighters, Japan persisted in its effort to continue the war. While some within the nation realized that they could not possibly outlast the United States, Japanese military leadership insisted on fighting until the bitter end throughout the summer of 1945. At Potsdam in July of 1945, Truman and the Allies proclaimed that unconditional surrender was the only acceptable outcome for Japan, but the declaration fell upon deaf ears. The continued Japanese resistance presented the new President with his earliest and greatest dilemma, whether or not to use the atomic bomb against Japan.
Background data

Data on the firebombing of Tokyo and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
(NOTE: Firebombing is a traditional bombing method using enormous numbers of incendiary bombs (phosphorous and napalm) over a period of many hours.)

Dates and times:

Tokyo Firebombing: 12:08am, March 10, 1945. 2 hours and 40 minutes of bombing
Hiroshima: 8:15am, August 6, 1945
Nagasaki: 11:01am, August 9, 1945

Estimated death tolls:

Tokyo Firebombing: 85,000 - 110,000 killed instantly, around 1 million injured
Hiroshima: 60,000 – 80,000 killed instantly, around 135,000 killed overall
Nagasaki: around 40,000 killed instantly, more than 50,000 killed overall

Aerial Photographs:

Before

Tokyo

After

Hiroshima

Nagasaki
Images of destruction

Tokyo:

Hiroshima:

Nagasaki:
Appeal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt on Aerial Bombardment of Civilian Populations, September 1, 1939

The President of the United States to the Governments of France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and His Britannic Majesty, September 1, 1939

The ruthless bombing from the air of civilians in unfortified centers of population during the course of the hostilities which have raged in the various quarters of the earth during the past few years, which has resulted in the maiming and in the death of thousands of defenseless men, women, and children, has sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity.

If resort is had to this form of inhumanity and barbarism during the period of the tragic conflagration with which the world is now confronted, hundreds of thousands of innocent human beings who have no responsibility for, and who are not even remotely participating in, the hostilities which have now broken out, will lose their lives. I am therefore addressing this urgent appeal to every government which may be engaged in hostilities publicly to affirm its determination that its armed forces shall in no event, and under no circumstances, undertake the bombardment from the air of civilians populations or of unfortified cities, upon the understanding that these same rules of warfare will be scrupulously observed by all of their opponents. I request an immediate reply.

Franklin D. Roosevelt
Manhattan Project scientist Leo Szilard met with Secretary of State James Byrnes on May 28, 1945. He later recalled:

“[Byrnes]...was concerned about Russia’s postwar behavior. Russian troops had moved into Hungary and Romania, and Byrnes thought it would be very difficult to persuade Russia to withdraw her troops from these countries, that Russia might be more manageable if impressed by American military might, and that a demonstration of the bomb might impress Russia.”

A PETITION TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Discoveries of which the people of the United States are not aware may affect the welfare of this nation in the near future. The liberation of atomic power which has been achieved places atomic bombs in the hands of the Army. It places in your hands, as Commander-in-Chief, the fateful decision whether or not to sanction the use of such bombs in the present phase of the war against Japan.

We, the undersigned scientists, have been working in the field of atomic power for a number of years. Until recently we have had to reckon with the possibility that the United States might be attacked by atomic bombs during this war and that her only defense might lie in a counterattack by the same means. Today with this danger averted we feel impelled to say what follows.

The war has to be brought speedily to a successful conclusion and the destruction of Japanese cities by means of atomic bombs may very well be an effective method of warfare. We feel, however, that such an attack on Japan could not be justified in the present circumstances. We believe that the United States ought not to resort to the use of atomic bombs in the present phase of the war, at least not unless the terms which will be imposed upon Japan after the war are publicly announced and subsequently Japan is given an opportunity to surrender....

Atomic bombs are primarily a means for the ruthless annihilation of cities. Once they were introduced as an instrument of war it would be difficult to resist for long the temptation of putting them to such use.

The last few years show a marked tendency toward increasing ruthlessness. At present our Air Forces, striking at the Japanese cities, are using the same methods of warfare which were condemned by American public opinion only a few years ago when applied by the Germans to the cities of England. Our use of atomic bombs in this war would carry the world a long way further on this path of ruthlessness.

Atomic power will provide the nations with new means of destruction. The atomic bombs at our disposal represent only the first step in this direction and there is almost no limit to the destructive power which will become available in the course of this development....

In view of the foregoing, we, the undersigned, respectfully petition that you exercise your power as Commander-in-Chief to rule that the United States shall not, in the present phase of the war, resort to the use of atomic bombs.

Signed: Leo Szilard and 58 co-signers
Excerpt from “Thank God for the Atom Bomb”
The New Republic - August 1981
by Paul Fussell

...On Okinawa, only weeks before Hiroshima, 123,000 Japanese and Americans killed each other. (About 140,000 Japanese died at Hiroshima.) “Just awful” was the comment on the Okinawa slaughter not of some pacifist but of General MacArthur....

... I was a twenty-one-year-old second lieutenant of infantry leading a rifle platoon. Although still officially fit for combat, in the German war I had already been wounded in the back and the leg badly enough to be adjudged, after the war, 40 percent disabled. But even if my leg buckled and I fell to the ground whenever I jumped out of the back of a truck, and even if the very idea of more combat made me breathe in gasps and shake all over, my condition was held to be adequate for the next act. 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, and 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. When the Enola Gay dropped its package, “There were cheers,” says John Toland, “over the intercom; it meant the end of the war.”...
Mr. Yoshitaka Kawamoto was thirteen years old in 1945. He was in the classroom at Zakoba-cho, 0.8 kilometers away from the hypocenter of the bomb.

KAWAMOTO: One of my classmates, I think his name is Fujimoto, he muttered something and pointed outside the window, saying, "A B-29 is coming." He pointed outside with his finger. So I began to get up from my chair and asked him, "Where is it?".... All I can remember was a pale lightening flash for two or three seconds. Then, I collapsed. I don't know much time passed before I came to. It was awful, awful. The smoke was coming in from somewhere above the debris. Sandy dust was flying around. I was trapped under the debris and I was in terrible pain and that's probably why I came to. I couldn't move, not even an inch. Then, I heard about ten of my surviving classmates singing our school song. I remember that. I could hear sobs. Someone was calling his mother... We thought that someone would come and help us out. That's why we were singing a school song so loud. But nobody came to help... Then I started to feel fear creeping in. I started to feel my way out pushing the debris away little by little, using all my strength. Finally I cleared the things around my head. And with my head sticking out of the debris, I realized the scale of the damage. The sky over Hiroshima was dark. Something like a tornado or a big fire ball was storming throughout the city... I crawled over the debris, trying to find someone who were still alive. Then, I found one of my classmates lying alive. I held him up in my arms. It is hard to tell, his skull was cracked open, his flesh was dangling out from his head. He had only one eye left, and it was looking right at me. First, he was mumbling something but I couldn't understand him... I went to Miyuki Bridge to get some water. At the river bank, I saw so many people collapsed there. And the small steps to the river were jammed, filled with people pushing their way to the water. I was small, so I pushed on the river along the small steps. The water was dead people. I had to push the bodies aside to drink the muddy water. We didn't know anything about radioactivity that time. I stood up in the water and so many bodies were floating away along the stream. I can't find the words to describe it. It was horrible. I felt fear.... I became completely bald. My eyes, I lost my eye sight, probably not because of the radioactivity, but because I became so weak. I couldn't see for about three months. But I was only thirteen, I was still young, and I was still growing when I was hit by the A-bomb. So about one year later. I regained my health. I recovered good health. Today I am still working as you can see. As the director of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, today, I am handing my message over to the children who visit. I want them to learn about Hiroshima. And when they grow up, I want them to hand down the message to the next generation with accurate information. I'd like to see him conveying the right sense of judgment so that we will not lead mankind to annihilation. That is our responsibility.
...Others, notably Gen. George C. Marshall, the influential Army Chief of Staff, were convinced an invasion would be necessary...

Japan had concentrated its strength for a decisive defense of the homeland. In June, Tokyo’s leaders decided upon a fight to the finish, committing themselves to extinction before surrender. As late as August, Japanese troops by the tens of thousands were pouring into defensive positions on Kyushu and Honshu...

The overall invasion plan was code-named Operation Downfall....

The invasion plan called for a US force of 2.5 million. Instead of being demobilized and going home, soldiers and airmen in Europe would redeploy to the Pacific. Forces already in the Pacific would be joined by 15 Army divisions and 63 air groups from the European Theater...

Operation Downfall consisted of two parts:

Operation Olympic. This invasion of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan’s main islands, was set for Nov. 1, 1945. It would be an amphibious landing a third larger than D-Day in Normandy....

Operation Coronet. This was the code name for an invasion, in March 1946, of Honshu, the largest of the Japanese islands. Coronet would require 1,171,646 US troops, including a landing force of 575,000 soldiers and marines. It would be the largest invasion force ever assembled. Operation Coronet would make use of airfields on Kyushu captured during Operation Olympic.

As Japan’s desperation grew, the ferocity of its armed resistance intensified. The code of bushido—“the way of the warrior”—was deeply ingrained, both in the armed forces and in the nation. Surrender was dishonorable...

In fact, Joint Staff planners on two occasions worked up casualty estimates and came out in the same range. In August 1944, using casualty rates from fighting on Saipan as a basis, they said that “it might cost us a half-million American lives and many times that number in wounded” to take the Japanese home islands. An April 1945 report projected casualties of 1,202,005—including 314,619 killed and missing—in Operations Olympic and Coronet, and more if either of the campaigns lasted more than 90 days.
By any rational calculation Japan was a beaten nation by the summer of 1945. Conventional bombing had reduced many of its cities to rubble, blockade had strangled its importation of vitally needed materials, and its navy had sustained such heavy losses as to be powerless to interfere with the invasion everyone knew was coming. By late June advancing American forces had completed the conquest of Okinawa, which lay only 350 miles from the southernmost Japanese home island of Kyushu. They now stood poised for the final onslaught.

Rational calculations did not determine Japan's position. Although a peace faction within the government wished to end the war—provided certain conditions were met—militants were prepared to fight on regardless of consequences. They claimed to welcome an invasion of the home islands, promising to inflict such hideous casualties that the United States would retreat from its announced policy of unconditional surrender. The militarists held effective power over the government and were capable of defying the emperor, as they had in the past, on the ground that his civilian advisers were misleading him.

Some historians have argued that while the first bomb might have been required to achieve Japanese surrender, dropping the second constituted a needless barbarism. The record shows otherwise. American officials believed more than one bomb would be necessary because they assumed Japanese hard-liners would minimize the first explosion or attempt to explain it away as some sort of natural catastrophe, precisely what they did. The Japanese minister of war, for instance, at first refused even to admit that the Hiroshima bomb was atomic. A few hours after Nagasaki he told the cabinet that "the Americans appeared to have one hundred atomic bombs . . . they could drop three per day. The next target might well be Tokyo."

Even after both bombs had fallen and Russia entered the war, Japanese militants insisted on such lenient peace terms that moderates knew there was no sense even transmitting them to the United States. Hirohito had to intervene personally on two occasions during the next few days to induce hard-liners to abandon their conditions and to accept the American stipulation that the emperor's authority "shall be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers." That the militarists would have accepted such a settlement before the bombs is farfetched, to say the least.
THE AMBASSADOR HAD just had a long private meeting with President Harry S Truman, in office less than six weeks following the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Truman had told him two extraordinary things: First, if all went well, the United States would soon possess a weapon of awesome and hitherto unknown power.

Charging him with "utmost secrecy," Truman revealed something "which I have not told anybody" -- that he had decided to postpone negotiations with Stalin on the shape of the postwar world until he knew for sure whether the weapon really worked.

"I was startled, shocked and amazed," Joseph E. Davies, former U.S. envoy to the Soviet Union, wrote in his diary on May 21, 1945 after the meeting. In an asterisked footnote he added: "Uranium -- for reason of security I will have to fill this in later."

On July 16, the first atom bomb was tested successfully at Alamogordo, N.M. On July 17, Truman sat down to talk with Stalin. And on Aug. 6, a bomb would fall on Hiroshima, ultimately killing an estimated 130,000 Japanese and changing the world.

Now, 40 years later, revelations based on privately held and previously classified information continue to illuminate the complex decision-making that led to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Most Americans assume the reason Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed was simply to prevent a costly invasion of Japan.

However, the newest documents have strengthened the theory that other considerations -- especially the new weapon's impact on diplomacy toward the Soviet Union -- were involved.

Before the Potsdam conference Truman was also advised by Stimson: "We shall probably hold more cards in our hands later than now." During the conference Truman was enormously bolstered by the successful atomic test. "Now I know what happened to Truman yesterday," Churchill observed. "I couldn't understand it. When he got to the meeting after having read this report (of the atomic test) he was a changed man."

"He told the Russians just where they got on and off and generally bossed the whole meeting."

He also told Stalin that America had developed a powerful new weapon, but did not specify that it was atomic.

There are still many unanswered questions about the decisions made during the month before Hiroshima. However, there is little doubt about some things. Had the United States so desired, either the forthcoming Russian declaration of war or a change in the surrender formula (or both together) seemed likely to end the war without the atomic bomb. There was also plenty of time to use the weapon if these options failed in the three months before the Kyushu landing.

"The historic fact remains, and must be judged in the aftertime," Churchill subsequently observed, "that the decision whether or not to use the atomic bomb ... was never even an issue." It is possible that top policy makers, especially the president, simply wanted to leave no stone unturned to end the war.

However, in view of what we now know about Japan's attempt to surrender, military factors alone appear inadequate to explain the choice.

As historian Martin Sherwin put it, the idea the atomic bomb would help make Russia manageable both in Asia and in Europe was an important consideration -- "inextricably involved."