

## July 1945: The Moment of Decision

By the time the atomic bomb was tested in July 1945, the defeat of Japan was the last important item remaining on the Allied war-time agenda. U.S. military officials had begun planning for large-scale landings on the Japanese main islands months earlier. Their initial strategy called for attacking the southernmost island of Kyushu with more than 750,000 troops—a plan that would not be ready to proceed until November 1945. If necessary, more than 1.5 million troops would invade Japan’s largest island, Honshu, in March 1946.

The toll on American forces was expected to be staggering. The battles of Okinawa and Iwo Jima had resulted in some of the highest U.S. casualty rates of the war, as Japanese defenders demonstrated their willingness to fight to the death and even undertake suicide missions. Japanese resistance to an attack on their main islands would be even fiercer. In addition to facing two million Japanese troops, American soldiers would have to fight women and children who had been trained to counter the invaders using sharpened bamboo sticks.

### Factors in U.S. Decision-Making

As the atomic bomb program neared completion, President Truman formed a high-level advisory panel, known as the Interim Committee, to offer recommendations on the use of the new weapon. The committee included representatives from government, the military, and the scientific community. In addition, a group of Manhattan Project scientists concerned about the political and moral questions raised by the atomic bomb issued its own conclusions in the Franck Report. Finally, several prominent figures in U.S. foreign policy, including the influential former ambassador to Japan, Joseph Grew, put forward their ideas on ending the war. They believed that the Japanese would surrender unconditionally if they were assured that their emperor would be allowed to keep his position.

In the next section of this unit, you and your classmates will consider three distinct

options for ending the war against Japan. Top government officials, military leaders, and Manhattan Project scientists discussed and evaluated these same options in the closing weeks of the war.

As you review the options that were discussed by the small circle of Americans aware of the atomic bomb program, imagine that you are a U.S. official in July 1945. Keep in mind that the choices confronting U.S. policymakers were framed by the six critical factors below.

**1. American military casualties:** By July 1945, U.S. forces in World War II had already suffered more than one million casualties, including those killed, missing in action, and wounded. American prisoners of war in Japan were dying of starvation. Some had been tortured and others publicly executed. The Japanese government had announced that it would execute Allied pilots captured over Japan. Both at home and at the battle front, Americans wanted a quick end to the war with a minimal loss of American lives.

**2. The policy of unconditional surrender:** The United States adopted the demand that the Axis powers surrender unconditionally shortly after our country’s entry into the war. There were three main reasons for the policy. First, the United States and Britain wanted to reassure the Soviet Union that they would not negotiate a separate peace with Nazi Germany. Second, the demand for unconditional surrender reinforced President Roosevelt’s message to the American people that the war was a struggle between good and evil, and that no compromise could be made with the forces of evil. Third, U.S. leaders did not want a repeat of the aftermath of World War I, when German military officials claimed that their army had not been defeated on the battlefield. U.S. leaders believed that this assertion had helped pave the way for a resurgence of German militarism under the Nazis. On May 7, 1945, the German armed forces had been forced to surrender without conditions, after Adolf Hitler committed suicide.

The Allied terms toward Japan were spelled out in the Potsdam Declaration. Japan would be expected to give up the territory it had acquired since 1914. Japan itself would be occupied by Allied forces, its wartime government removed, and its armed forces dismantled. The declaration, however, did not address the postwar status of the Japanese emperor, whom the Japanese viewed as divine. Japanese military officials had vowed to fight

to the death to preserve the emperor's position. The status of the emperor was also a subject of debate within the Truman administration.

### 3. Emerging problems with the Soviet

**Union:** The uneasy wartime alliance with the Soviets began unraveling soon after the defeat of Nazi Germany. On the diplomatic front, U.S. and Soviet officials increasingly found themselves locking horns over the political future of Eastern Europe, particularly of Poland, and

## The Potsdam Declaration

1. [We] have conferred and agree that Japan shall be given an opportunity to end this war.
2. [Our] forces are poised to strike the final blows upon Japan. This military power is sustained and inspired by the determination of all Allied nations to prosecute the war against Japan until she ceases to resist.
3. ...The full application of our military power, backed by our resolve, will mean the inevitable and complete destruction of the Japanese armed forces and just as inevitably the utter devastation of the Japanese homeland.
4. The time has come for Japan to decide whether...she will follow the path of reason.
5. Following are our terms. We will not deviate from them. There are no alternatives. We shall brook no delay.
6. There must be eliminated for all time the authority and influence of those who have deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest, for we insist that a new order of peace, security and justice will be impossible until irresponsible militarism is driven from the world.
7. ...Points in Japanese territory to be designated by the Allies shall be occupied to secure the achievement of the basic objectives we are here setting forth.
8. [Japan will be stripped of all territory acquired or conquered since 1914.]
9. The Japanese military forces, after being completely disarmed, shall be permitted to return to their homes with the opportunity to lead peaceful and productive lives.
10. We do not intend that the Japanese shall be enslaved as a race or destroyed as a nation, but stern justice shall be meted out to all war criminals, including those who have visited cruelties upon our prisoners. The Japanese government shall remove all obstacles to the revival and strengthening of democratic tendencies among the Japanese people...
11. Japan shall be permitted to maintain such industries as will sustain her economy and permit the exaction of just reparations in kind, but not those industries which would enable her to rearm for war...
12. The occupying forces of the Allies shall be withdrawn from Japan as soon as those objectives have been accomplished and there has been established in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people a peacefully inclined and responsible government.
13. We call upon the Government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all the 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.

the joint Allied administration of occupied Germany. The Soviets also wanted the United States to continue providing the Lend/Lease aid that had helped them win the war against Germany. In addition, U.S. leaders were concerned about the Soviet position in East Asia. Stalin had agreed that three months after the defeat of Germany, the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan. Although Roosevelt had welcomed the Soviet pledge to attack Japanese forces in China, the Truman administration came to fear that Soviet involvement in the war would lead to demands for territory and play into Stalin's strategy to expand Soviet influence in East Asia.

**4. The destructive power of the atomic bomb:** Originally, the Manhattan Project had been launched to counter the threat posed by Germany's atomic program. The Japanese had not seriously pursued an atomic program. By the time the atomic bomb was available, however, Japan was the only possible target. U.S. officials were confronted with wrenching moral questions. The atomic bomb was known to be able to wipe out an entire city at once. The radiation emitted from the explosion permeates the landscape; the bomb not only destroys people and buildings on impact, but its effects continue to harm the environment for many years. Scientists at the time were aware of the dangers of radiation, but did not fully understand its potential.

**5. The preservation of American values:** The United States did not choose to fight World War II. Japan brought the war to American shores, and U.S. leaders insisted that they were fighting to repel aggression, preserve freedom, and champion the dignity and rights of



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, U.S. President Harry Truman, and Soviet Premier Josef Stalin meet at Potsdam in 1945.

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the individual. By July 1945, the United States had all but achieved victory against an enemy that, in American eyes, had started an unjust war and had fought in a barbaric and uncivilized manner. U.S. leaders now possessed what they believed to be the means to bring about a quick conclusion to the war. As the moment of decision neared, they were forced to ask themselves if the ends they had pursued for four years justified using the means at their disposal.

**6. The possibility of Japanese surrender:** Allied efforts had taken a huge toll on Japan, and there were reasons to believe that Japan might be willing to surrender before an invasion by U.S. troops. The Allied sea blockade of the Japanese islands had effectively cut supplies of food and war materials. Japanese oil shipments, critical to the war effort, had been reduced by 85 percent. The Japanese people were facing the prospect of slow starvation. In addition, the Allied blockade prevented Japan from transporting the three million Japanese troops stationed in China back to their homeland.

Additionally, the U.S. air bombardment

of Japanese cities had cut Japan's industrial production to 40 percent of its wartime peak and had killed hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians. One hundred and eighty square miles of Japanese urban areas had been leveled by General LeMay's campaign. U.S. military planners believed that they would run out of targets within several months.

Finally, U.S. intelligence operations, which had broken Japan's diplomatic code, informed the Truman administration that the

Japanese had secretly approached the Soviet Union as early as May 1945 to suggest that the Soviets help end the war. (The Soviet Union did not declare war against Japan until August 1945.) After the Allies called on Japan to immediately surrender in the Potsdam Declaration of July 1945, Japanese diplomats indicated that they wanted an impartial third party to mediate their surrender using the Potsdam Declaration as the basis for negotiations.