

Difficult Decisions

Vice-President Harry S. Truman became president of the United States after President Franklin D. Roosevelt died in April 1945. Shortly after becoming president, Truman was faced with the most difficult decision of his life. Should he use the newly invented atomic bomb against Japan in an effort to save American lives and end World War II?

Below is a list of key questions, arguments, and facts presented to President Truman. Use any of the following formats to address these issues: classroom discussion, cooperative learning groups, debate, role-playing or dramatization.

1. The atomic bomb was such a new weapon that most people were not aware of the devastating effects it could produce. Consequently, some scientists believed that the United States should have conducted a public demonstration as a warning in an attempt to avoid actually using it.
2. President Truman was afraid that if a public test of this new weapon was unsuccessful, Japanese leaders would not take the U.S. seriously.
3. Many scientists felt the atomic bomb was too deadly and that there were too many questions about the extent of damage it would cause and what its long-lasting effects would be.
4. Some military advisors believed that Japan was already close to surrendering.
5. Other advisors believed that Japan still had a strong military. They feared that the war might last another two years and cause up to 500,000 more American casualties.

6. Should President Truman have warned the Japanese about the atomic bomb?
7. In July, 1945, President Truman warned the Japanese to surrender or be destroyed, but he did not tell them about the atomic bomb.
8. Scientists told President Truman that approximately 20,000 Japanese would die and many homes and factories would be destroyed if he used the atomic bomb.
9. In reality, the first atomic bomb killed 80,000 – 100,000 people and destroyed five square miles in Hiroshima. Three days later, the second atomic bomb killed 40,000 people in Nagasaki. Thousands more died later as a result of injuries and from exposure to radiation.
10. Japan surrendered on August 14th.