

# Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped (TRANSCRIPT)

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Narrator and interviewer: Peter Jennings

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## TRANSCRIPT:

### 1. Introduction

Harry Truman: I made the only decision I ever knew how to make. I did what I thought was right.

Narrator: 50 years ago the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Japan. To this day Americans know very little about how that decision was reached.

William Lanouette (historian): It's been justified ever since as something that saved American lives. The ambiguity is something we're really not prepared for.

Narrator: Tonight a week before the bombs' anniversary: why it was dropped.

1. Did it shorten the war?
2. Did it save American lives?
3. Was it necessary?
4. Were there alternatives?
5. Did the United States need to be the first and only nation to use an atomic bomb?
6. Do Americans know the truth about the decision to drop the atomic bomb?

Narrator: Do Americans know the truth about the decision to drop the atomic bomb?

William Lanouette: Americans know very little about why the bomb was used.

## 2. The Smithsonian Exhibit 01:06

Narrator: Two years ago America's premier history museum, The Smithsonian, set out to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the flight of the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima.

Smithsonian spokesman: We want to present as best we can multiple views of that history, not a singular view of one or another of a third party.

Narrator: From the beginning, the proposal for the exhibit was under attack. Too many pictures of victims, the critics said, too much American guilt.

Unnamed critic: I can't believe that they would create such an abomination.

Narrator: By the spring of 1994, some veterans' groups had declared virtual war on the museum, saying the exhibit portrayed Americans as vengeful aggressors; the Japanese as innocent victims.

Unnamed critic: It's certainly un-American. It might be close to treason.

Narrator: The Smithsonian tried to incorporate the veterans' views, but the American Legion vowed to resist anything that questioned the moral and political wisdom involved in dropping the atomic bomb.

Unnamed critic from a veterans' group: The curators wrote a political statement, an anti-nuclear, anti-atomic political statement.

Narrator: Finally, the exhibit collapsed over a hypothetical question: How many American lives did the bomb really save?

Unnamed critic from veterans' group: There are literally millions of Americans who would not be here today if those weapons had not been used.

Narrator: Many veterans insisted that by dropping the bomb the U.S. avoided a ground invasion of the Japanese mainland. One million American lives, they argued, had been saved, but when the Smithsonian responded that such a claim had no historical basis, the vets went to Capitol Hill. Eighty-one congressmen took up their cause.

So after a bruising two-year battle, the Smithsonian bent to the pressure and decided to present just the Enola Gay without commentary. There would be nothing on the decision to drop the bomb, and there would be no pictures of the victims.

Good evening. I'm Peter Jennings. Tonight we are going to revisit the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. We're going to go behind the scenes of the Truman administration 50 years ago as America struggled to finally end the bloody war in the Pacific.

The site of Enola Gay, newly refurbished and on exhibition here at The Smithsonian, is a shiny reminder that in the closing days of War World II, the United States, in its determination to end the war, became the first and only nation ever to use the atomic bomb. It was a subject of controversy then as it is now.

## 3. History of the A-Bomb 03:58

Narrator of film clip from 1940s: Ladies and gentlemen, the 33rd president of the United States, Harry S. Truman.

Narrator: In 1964, Harry Truman would cooperate with the television series that laid out the official history of his presidency.

Harry Truman: Good to see you here this morning for a discussion, I hope, of some historical matters in which you ought to be interested. My goodness, the alive young lady with the red hair right behind the schoolteacher there.

Young lady: Mr. President, why did you drop the atom bomb?

Narrator of film clip from 1940s: Mr. President, the future wants to know. Was it right to drop the atom bomb?

Harry Truman: My chief purpose was to end the war in victory with the least possible loss of American lives. I never had any qualms about using an instrument that finally ended the war in which we would have had 250,000 to 300,000 of our youngsters killed and 700,000 of them maimed. I made the only decision I ever knew how to make. I did what I thought was right.

Narrator: The official history of the atomic bomb was also reflected from movie screens. In fact, Hollywood's first attempt at an A-bomb blockbuster was not released until it had White House approval. In the original script the actor playing President Truman made what seemed a quick and easy decision: it was American boys or the bomb, but the President's advisers, who previewed the film, were concerned about his image, and the president himself wrote to the man who portrayed him.

Harry Truman: My only objection is it appeared to have been a snap judgment program. It was made to appear as if no consideration had been given to the result of dropping the bomb. That is an absolutely wrong impression.

Journalist (portrayed by a film actor): Thank God we've got the bomb and not the Japanese.

Narrator: What movie audiences finally saw was an agonized decision.

Harry Truman (portrayed by a film actor): That's one argument for our using it, Charlie, but it's not the decisive argument.

Journalist (portrayed by a film actor): The whole thing is terrifying. You must have spent many sleepless nights over it.

Harry Truman (portrayed by a film actor): A year less of war, Charlie, will mean life for 300,000, maybe half a million of America's finest youth. These were the decisive considerations in my consent.

Journalist (portrayed by a film actor): As president of the United States, sir, you can make no other decision.

Harry Truman (portrayed by a film actor): As president I could not.

Narrator: In the film there are many factual mistakes. The Enola Gay takes off on its historic mission and then braves heavy flack over Hiroshima. On August the 6,1945 there was no hostile fire.

Enola Gay flight crew 1 (film actor): 250,000 people down there starting the day, in a city about the size of Dallas, Texas. In about one second it will be wiped off the map, and they'll never know what hit them.

Enola Gay flight crew 2 (film actor): We've been dropping warning leaflets on them for 10 days now. That's 10 days more warning than they gave us at Pearl Harbor.

Narrator: In fact, no leaflets were dropped specifically warning the city below of a powerful new bomb. The film won the Academy Award for its special effects, and Hollywood had done its part to tell the official story, that the use of the bomb on enemy cities had been necessary and just.

## 4. Birth of the Bomb 07:51

Narrator: This was a war fought against evil, against military dictatorships in Germany, Italy and Japan. This was a war the United States did not seek, but after Pearl Harbor fought with a unity of purpose it has not experienced since.

Franklin Roosevelt: No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

Narrator: It was Franklin Roosevelt who authorized a project hidden deep in the New Mexico desert to build the atomic bomb. It was the president's most closely guarded secret. The scientists drawn to Los Alamos had come believing they could help save Western civilization from fascism by beating the Germans to the bomb. Their mission was to make a weapon like no other. It was code named the Manhattan Project. Robert Oppenheimer was its scientific leader. Its military director was Army General Leslie Groves.

By 1945, the Manhattan Project employed 160,000 workers at 37 factories and labs across the country. General Groves promised the first atomic test by the middle of the year. President Roosevelt would not live to see it. On April the 12th, 1945, the death of the Commander in Chief, three and a half years after Pearl Harbor, stunned the nation that had come to depend on him. The people's fear would be reflected in the words of Roosevelt's chief of staff, Admiral William Leahy:

William Leahy: The Captain of the team is gone. We are all at loose ends and confused as to who may be capable of giving sage advice and counsel to the new leader.

Martin Sherwin (historian): They were shocked. Harry Truman, from their point-of-view, was an insignificant figure. Perhaps almost anyone compared to Roosevelt would have been insignificant, but Truman was, on the long list of insignificant figures, perhaps the most insignificant they could imagine. They had no respect for him. They had no confidence in him.

Narrator: Colonel Henry Stimson was Roosevelt's Secretary of War.

Henry Stimson: I think everyone of us felt very keenly the loss of a real personal friend. I know I did. No one knows what the new president's views are, at least I don't.

Martin Sherwin: There's a note in the Stimson diaries of about a year or a year and a half before Truman became president in which Stimson noted after a conversation with Truman that Truman is a pretty untrustworthy man. But Stimson felt it was his obligation to educate Truman, especially about the atomic bomb, which was at that point Stimson's most important responsibility.

Narrator: Harry Truman had been vice president for 82 days. In that time he had met with Franklin Roosevelt only twice. He knew nothing of the atomic bomb.

Martin Sherwin: Stimson went up to the president, the new president, and said, "We are involved in making a most terrible weapon."

Henry Stimson: Within four months we shall in all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history. One bomb of which could destroy a whole city. The world in its present state of moral advance would be eventually at the mercy of such a weapon. In other words, modern civilization might be completely destroyed.

Samuel Walker (historian): When Stimson and Groves first briefed him in detail about the bombing in April of 1945, he kind of thumbed through the paper and he wasn't terribly interested in what they had to say. He caught the gist of what they were trying to say, which was this is the most terrible weapon in history, and it can take out a whole city. So he knew that, but how that translated into his actions, or how it translated into his thinking about the bomb, is much less clear.

David Robertson (author): There was Truman, who did not have all those bright, young men around him as Franklin Roosevelt had. By his own account he had received absolutely no preparation for assuming the presidency nor had he been privy to the development of the atomic bomb. And he immediately looked to who was the most experienced man politically and in terms of diplomacy that he could trust, someone like him.

Narrator: That man that would have so much influence on Harry Truman was James Byrnes of South Carolina. Byrnes had believed that he would be Roosevelt's vice president until Roosevelt picked Truman at the convention. So Byrnes would join President Truman's circle as the man who thought he should have the job. He was one of the few men who'd known anything about the bomb and had warned Roosevelt that the huge amounts of money being spent meant political scandal if it were not a success.

David Robertson: He knew more than Truman, and Truman knew that Jimmy Byrnes could make certain that the atomic project would show results both militarily and politically. So Byrnes took a slight knowledge, which he had as his leverage, to present himself as Mister Atomic Bomb to Harry.

Narrator: So there was Truman with his shrewd, calculating southern politician on one side and on the other the more cautious, conservative Colonel Stimson.

Harry Truman: Byrnes had already told me that the weapon might be so powerful as to be potentially capable of wiping out entire cities and killing people on an unprecedented scale. It might well put us in a position to dictate our terms at the end of the war. Stimson, on the other hand, seemed to be at least as much concerned with the role of the atomic bomb and the shaping of history as in its capacity to shorten this war.

## 5. The Killing Year 14:24

In the 1964 television version of his presidency, President Truman described the pressure to use the bomb.

Harry Truman: General Groves is the military man in charge of the whole bomb-building project. He wrote, and I quote, "Truman was like a little boy on a toboggan. He never had an opportunity to say, 'We will drop that bomb.' Any political leader would have been crucified later if American lives were lost in the invading of Japan." Well, I wasn't worried about being crucified.

Narrator: When Harry Truman became president, Germany was close to surrender, but the war in the Pacific was still to be won, against an enemy Americans had come to hate even more than the Germans.

John Dower (historian): The Japanese behavior was appalling and notorious toward Chinese, toward civilians, toward people throughout Asia, toward prisoners of war. It was very clear that in Germany there were good Germans and bad Germans. And almost always the Americans described themselves as fighting Hitler or Nazi's. In the case of the Japanese you get all sorts of slogans like "the only good Jap is a dead Jap."

Narrator: Less than two weeks before Truman became president, on Easter Sunday 1945, the U.S. 10th Army landed on the Japanese island of Okinawa. It would be the bloodiest battle of the Pacific War. A marine who survived wrote it this way:

Soldier's letter: The struggle for survival went on day after weary day. To those who entered the meat grinder itself, the war was a nether world of horror from which escape seemed less and less likely. As casualties mounted and the fighting dragged on and on, time had no meaning. Life had no meaning.

Narrator: Many people who argue that the atomic bomb was necessary remember Okinawa, an enemy hidden in caves who would not surrender even when faced with certain death.

Soldier's letter: I didn't think twice whether civilians or soldiers were inside. Any remorse about human beings shot in there disappeared pretty quick because this was survival. I wanted to live. I wanted to go home.

Narrator: But the story on Okinawa was not the story of the whole war. In the summer of 1945, what sort of shape was Japan in militarily?

Barton Bernstein (historian): Japan, militarily, was in tatters. The Air Force had been virtually destroyed. The Navy had been shattered. The Army had been repatriated for the last homeland defense. Japan was clearly near defeat. The question is: was Japan near surrender?

Narrator: Surrender was the question. It would turn on the U.S. demand that surrender be total, total with no conditions, and the Japanese fear that the Imperial Throne would not be allowed to survive.

William Lanouette (author): The Emperor to them was like a God and they worshiped him. So in a sense he personified their nation, and until he gave a signal that it was all right to surrender, they were ready to fight until the death.

John Dower: Japan's own policy lead by the military forces and supported by the Emperor of Japan was to show the Americans how terribly costly it would be if they tried to push the war toward an invasion or to unconditional surrender. The last year of the war was the killing year, and neither side could seem to break out of this before a final cataclysmic end.

Narrator: In this killing year, Japan's suicide pilots were promised glory in death, sent off in aircraft laden with bombs and only enough fuel for a one-way trip. A 19-year-old pilot would write this on the eve of a mission:

Japanese air force pilot: To bring the nation to victory was our thought, and what was that nation? The land of my parents, of my younger brothers and sisters. Can we bear seeing our country invaded by outside enemies? That's what was on my mind. We were innocents.

Narrator: The Japanese kamikaze mission would strike a chord of terror in the American psyche and convince American troops that the enemy would fight to the bitter end. That summer America was watching too many of its young men die.

In this killing year, the United States would play its part as well. Through the night of March 9, 1945, while Roosevelt was still president, 334 American B-29's firebombed Tokyo. Almost 17 square miles were destroyed. 80,000 Japanese were killed. The Air Force general in charge of the firebombing, General Curtis Lemay, said the United States had finally stopped swatting at flies and had gone after the manure pile.

Leon Sigal (author): They've gotten gradually used to a war where the normal limits on killing non-combatants have been overridden by many sides in the war. The Japanese used gas warfare in China. Think of the number of civilians who had died in Russia because of the German invasion. Think of the people in the concentration camps who were dying, all non-combatants.

Narrator: The war for total victory had become total war.

Robert Messer (author): That moral threshold of killing civilians deliberately in mass terror bombing had already been crossed in the Roosevelt Administration. That was not something that Harry Truman was going to roll back or rescind.

Narrator: Neither would President Truman interfere with the atomic bomb program Roosevelt had set in motion. Scientists on the Manhattan Project raced to develop not just one bomb but two. The simpler would use a rare form of uranium, the more complicated would use plutonium. Either, they knew, would be a terrible force. The man in charge, General Leslie Groves, thought it his duty to make sure the terrible force was used. He had a blank check to do what it took to get the bomb ready. Then the assumption was it would be dropped.

Leon Sigal: The thing that's peculiar about the bomb was there was no procedure for deciding except that ultimately the president would have to say yes or no to something, but who would be involved and whatever was sort of made up as it went along.

Narrator: As he relentlessly pushed the scientists, General Groves also pushed to appoint a target committee of military officers to choose the places the bomb should be dropped. It was not their job to decide whether the bomb should be used, only where and how.

Leon Sigal: And Groves' concern was to preserve some targets untouched in Japan so that he could demonstrate precisely the impact of the bomb on a city.

William Lanouette: Their problem wasn't picking targets. It was the fear that they would run out of them. It's really perverse, but they had to put four cities off limits from conventional bombing in order to be able to drop an A-bomb on them and see what would happen.

Narrator: The official history has always taught that the atomic bombs were directed at military targets. But this was General Groves' first choice: Kyoto, Japan's ancient and sacred capital. Surrounded by mountains, Kyoto had the perfect terrain to concentrate the bomb's impact. And as the target committee minutes make clear, Kyoto was not listed for military reasons.

Target committee report: It was agreed that psychological factors in target selection were of great importance. Two aspects of this are 1) Obtaining the greatest psychological effect against Japan and 2) Making the initial use efficiently spectacular for the importance of the weapon to be internationally recognized when publicity is released. In this respect, Kyoto has the advantage of a people being more highly intelligent and hence better able to appreciate the significance of the weapon.

Leon Sigal: When you actually look at the target choices, the aim points are never military installations. They are in fact the center, the geographic center points, of cities. Yes, in every city there are some things that are militarily related. There are factories or whatever. But the target is the city, and the aim point is the center of the city.

Narrator: At these highest levels of decision-making, did anybody ever object to the targeting of civilians?

Barton Bernstein: Basically only one person objected directly before Hiroshima, and that was, ironically, General George C. Marshall, the army chief of staff, who, on May 29, 1945, argued with Stimson that if America dropped the bomb on a city, the opprobrium, the blame cast upon the United States might last and destroy the American image. Marshall never raised the issue again so far as we know during World War II, and after World War II he never admitted that he'd raised the question.

Narrator: It was the target committee that also put Hiroshima on the list.

Target committee report: Hiroshima is the largest untouched target not on the 21st bomber command priority list. Consideration should be given to this city.

Narrator: Hiroshima, a coastal city on the southern tip of Japan's main island. There was an army headquarters here, home to 43,000 soldiers. The city itself had a population of almost 300,000. The army base was not the center of the target. Ground zero was the center of the city.

## **6. Arguing Against the Bomb**      **26:09**

Narrator: By 1944, a special unit was practicing bomb drops from a remote secret air base near Wendover, Utah. President Truman described it in his television history.

Harry Truman: To get ready for the delivery of the bomb, the 509th Composite Group of the 20th Air Force has been practicing for over a year in an isolated desert of Wendover Field, but they didn't know what they were training for. They were making visual, not instrumental, drops, and they were practicing to drop only one bomb, which to them was funnier still.

Narrator: The secret development of the terrible weapon during the war fought for total victory had created a powerful impulse to use it. Only the scientists seemed to understand it would change the world forever. On the eve of its success, some of them felt increasingly trapped between their ominous invention and the political leaders who would determine its use.

William Lanouette: They wanted to, if you will, play fair with the Japanese and warn them, not kill civilians, if the weapon itself would scare them into surrender. I think, more importantly, they wanted to keep from surprising the Russians.

Martin Sherman: They felt that the more of a surprise it was, the more damage it did. The more awesome the weapon appeared to be, the more likely it was to lead to a nuclear arms race. It would, by the nature of its effectiveness, drive the Soviets to get it as quickly as possible.

Narrator: The most outspoken of the scientist was Leo Szilard, a Hungarian émigré who, along with Albert Einstein, had written the letter that convinced Roosevelt to build the bomb in the first place. In 1945, Szilard was again looking to the future. He set out on a mission to save civilization, not from the Nazi's this time but from the bomb. He was determined to meet the president. He and two colleagues were told instead to travel to Spartanburg, South Carolina to meet "Mr. Atomic Bomb," James Byrnes. They had no idea who he was. This would be virtually the only meeting in the spring of 1945 where someone argued against dropping the bomb.

William Lanouette: And they sat down with Byrnes to try to tell him about the need to have international control of this weapon, to tell the Russians ahead of time so they would not be surprised, not scared. And he was talking to just the wrong man. Byrnes had seen the advances the Russians were making in Europe, and he wanted to impress the Russians with American firmness and with the fact that this was going to be a shared peace. And so to him the bomb was just the thing he was waiting for.

Leo Szilard: I was completely flabbergasted by the assumption that dropping the bomb might make Russia more manageable. I was concerned at this point that by demonstrating the bomb and using it in the war against Japan, we might start an atomic arms race between American and Russia, which might end with the destruction of both countries.

David Robertson: Physicists were, to Jimmy Byrnes, political naïfs. They had never stood for an election. They would never have to face the mother of the textile worker who had been killed at Okinawa, and they did not think in terms as Byrnes thought. Byrnes thought almost exclusively in political terms. No one could ask what point politics had in this meeting. And I think that Byrnes would have replied "everything."

William Lanouette: Byrnes went on to dominate the debate within the federal government, and having met with somebody like Szilard, he decided, in fact, that his own views were true. He could dismiss these people as being crackpots, as being somehow preoccupied with something that didn't matter. And so it probably gave Byrnes an assurance to carry forward just the policies that Szilard feared he would carry forward.

Leo Szilard: I was rarely as depressed as when we left Byrnes' house and walked toward the station. I thought to myself how much better off the world might be had I been born in America and become influential in American politics, and had Byrnes been born in Hungary and studied physics.

Narrator: Szilard would not give up. In the weeks before the bomb was dropped, he would enlist the support of 68 other atomic scientist urging the president to reconsider its use. President Truman never saw their petition.



William Lanouette: Months and years later when he appeared in public, Szilard would make light of this by saying, “The public is fascinated by mass murderers, and I’m a mass murderer.” He said this in his ironic and almost uncontrollable way of making light of things that bothered him deeply, but I think he did see himself for the rest of his life as a mass murderer.

Narrator: Two days after Szilard left Spartanburg, James Byrnes returned to Washington where he had been made a member of a secret committee appointed by War Secretary Stimson. The committee included the inner circle of government and establishment leaders who had recommended the bomb to Roosevelt.

Robert Messer: Truman, even before Byrnes surfaced as his Secretary of State, secretly made Byrnes his personal representative to this top-secret advisory committee called the Interim Committee. It’s a powerful indication of Truman’s delegation of these kinds of crucial responsibilities to Byrnes.

Narrator: James Byrnes, whom the president had decided to name his Secretary of State, would become a potent force. Meeting in the Pentagon on the 31st of May, the committee’s official agenda was nuclear policy after the war. Colonel Stimson went into the meeting worried about how the Russians would react to the bomb. Army chief General Marshall suggested Russian scientists be invited to the first test. Byrnes cut them off. The Russians would not be let in on the atomic secret. Stimson backed out.

William Sherman: I think a younger Stimson might have pushed a lot harder, but remember what you have here is a jockeying for a relationship with the president.

Narrator: It would not be the last time that President Truman bent to the will of James Byrnes.

Samuel Walker: Byrnes always looked at Truman as the junior partner. I think that he had a kind of contemptuous attitude toward Truman, and I think that he did see himself as the instructor and Truman as a pupil.

William Lanouette: He was overwhelmed with running Congress. He was trying to find his way around the White House. He had people who had been doing this job for years in the form of the very dominant Secretary of War, the very dominant General Groves. He brought in the most dominant person he knew in diplomacy, which was James Byrnes. So he was really letting these people run the show.

## 7. Three Options 33:48

Harry Truman: The president of the United States is Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. The chiefs of staff had to make the plan for the invasion of Japan without considering the atomic bomb. It was estimated that to land on Kyushu and conquer it would cause 250,000 of our youngsters to be killed and 500,000 of them to be maimed for life.

Narrator: The projected casualty numbers that President Truman would use later in life would range from 250,000 to a million. That notion of putting a million lives at risk long ago became a central part of the argument for using the bomb. Though the figure of a million has never been found in any of the briefings President Truman received from his military commanders, the real debate in the summer of 1945 was not whether an invasion would be a tragedy. It would have been, but there was no plan to invade for another several months. The real question was how to end the war without that bloody fight to the finish. There was a military option. There was a diplomatic one, and there was the bomb.

The military option was to wait for the Russians to get into the war. In a secret agreement, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had promised Roosevelt that three months after the end of the European campaign, his Red Army would move against the Japanese occupying China. As early as April, U.S. military intelligence concluded that a Russian invasion could be decisive.

Intelligence report: By the autumn of 1945, we believe that the vast majority of Japanese will realize the inevitability of absolute defeat, regardless of whether the U.S.S.R. has actually entered the war against Japan. If at any time U.S.S.R. should enter the war, all Japanese will realize that absolute defeat is inevitable.

Narrator: The Americans had also broken Japanese military and diplomatic codes. Reading the secret diplomatic intercepts known as Magic, the United States knew that Japan itself understood what Russia's entry into the war would mean to them. In the spring of 1945, the Japanese foreign minister cabled his ambassador in Moscow.

Japanese foreign minister's cable: It is a matter of utmost urgency that we should not only prevent Russia from entering the war but should also induce her to adopt a favorable attitude toward Japan.

Narrator: The Japanese ambassador in Moscow cabled back to Tokyo that there was not much reason to be encouraged.

Ambassador's reply: It is hard to say whether the present eastward movement of troops is being carried out for the purpose of bringing pressure against Japan. We must be on our guard as soon as we notice any marked movement of troops toward eastern Siberia.

Narrator: The increasingly urgent messages asked the Russians to help negotiate a surrender. Stalin ignored them.

Japanese cable: Unfortunately, it now appears that we shall soon have to abandon our struggle on Okinawa. If Russia, by some remote chance, should suddenly decide to take advantage of our weakness, and intervene against us with the force of arms, we should be in a completely hopeless situation.

Narrator: 75,000 Japanese had died on Okinawa. 13,000 Americans had been killed. As the Japanese war widows were presented with the ashes of their husbands, in Washington there were some people looking for a political way to end the war.

McGeorge Bundy (co-author of Stimson's memoirs): There were three things that were known in the government in Washington that were not known before the first bomb was dropped on the Japanese. One was the bomb itself. One was that the Russian's were coming, and the third was under terms and conditions to be agreed, the Japanese could keep the emperor.

Narrator: That was the political option, let the Japanese keep their Emperor. And President Truman knew that everyone in the bitterly divided Japanese government would insist on it.

Samuel Walker: Policy makers who were advising Truman, those who were closest to Truman and for whom he had a great deal of respect were saying, "Look Mr. President, one way we can end the war as rapidly as possible is to modify our demand for unconditional surrender."

Gar Alperovitz (author): Our intelligence people to a man said, "Look, if you harm the God they will fight forever. You must tell them that you're not going to do that. Say that he can be like the King of England. We won't harm him. He won't have any power, but in some way make it very clear that that will not be the case, that he will not be harmed."

Narrator: Lost in today's debate is the fact that military men were among the key voices urging a change in surrender terms. Admiral William Leahy, the senior military man in the White House who called the bomb "that fool thing," argued there were military reasons for a negotiated peace.

White House record (no speaker identified): Admiral Leahy said that he could not agree with those who said to him that unless we obtain the unconditional surrender of the Japanese that we will have lost the war. What he did fear was that our insistence on unconditional surrender would result only in making the Japanese desperate and thereby increasing our casualty list.

Martin Sherwin: There were alternatives, and Truman and Stimson and Byrnes and the others were fully conscious of those alternatives. One was to wait for the Soviets to come into the war. One was to modify unconditional surrender. Another alternative was to use the atomic bomb.

Narrator: The bomb had its strong advocates in many of the members of the secret Interim Committee. The official history points to these men as the ones who carefully considered whether the bomb was necessary. But the evidence shows that the central question of using the bomb was raised only by accident.

Martin Sherwin: When this committee broke for lunch there was a discussion at one of the tables about alternatives to using the bomb directly on a city. Now this discussion took place because the decision was simply accepted that that's what's going to happen and there were a few of the committee members, including some of the scientists saying, "Do we really have to do it that way? Is it possible to do it some other way?"

Narrator: Robert Oppenheimer, the scientific leader of the Manhattan Project remembered that sometime during the lunch, Colonel Stimson emphasized the appalling lack of conscience and compassion that the war had brought about.

Robert Oppenheimer: He was not exhilarated about the bombings of Hamburg or Dresden or Tokyo. Colonel Stimson felt that as far as degradation went, we had had it, that it would take a new life and a new breath to heal the harm.

Narrator: But the idea of demonstrating the bomb was vetoed. The idea of warning the Japanese was dismissed.

Interviewer: At the time did Colonel Stimson have any doubts about...?

McGeorge Bundy: Not about using it, no. Using it against the city? If one had pushed him, he would have said, "Well, we fought that battle. We lost it."

Narrator: The next day James Byrnes moved to settle the question that had been raised by accident, and he pushed for a formal vote.

Interim Committee record: The present view of the committee was that the bomb should be used against Japan as soon as possible, that it should be used on a war plant surrounded by workers' homes, and that it should be used without prior warning.

Narrator: It's one of myths that's persisted since the war, isn't it, that the atomic bomb was dropped on a military target? In fact...

McGeorge Bundy: It was not a myth. It's a military target. It's a military target like New York.

Narrator: If there was a day when the bomb decision was sealed and delivered, it would be the first of June when James Byrnes went to the White House to tell the president what the committee had approved.

David Robertson: But Byrnes was covering his bases here. As the president's personal representative on the committee, Byrnes was doing the job that he had been chosen to do, which was covering the president. Nothing, from a political point of view, is so advantageous as a committee of shared responsibility. "Mr. President, here it is in writing, from the most experienced public men within this nation, from the best scientific minds. You are making the right decision. Do it. Do it quickly and do it with no warning."

Narrator: How the bomb would be used had now been confirmed. Five days later, the aging Secretary of War met with the president. Colonel Stimson's diary of their conversation reflects his own agony and confusion about attacking cities.

Henry Stimson: I told him I was busy considering our conduct of the war against Japan, and how I was trying to hold the Air Force to precision bombing. First, because I did not want to have the U.S. get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in

atrocities, and second, I was a little fearful that before we could get ready, the Air Force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the weapon would not have a fair background to show its strength. He laughed and said he understood.

Narrator: In early July, Colonel Stimson made one last effort to convince the president that the war might end if the Japanese were offered a chance to surrender. He wrote in his memoirs, "It's possible, in light of the final surrender, that a clear and earlier exposition of the American willingness to retain the emperor would have produced an earlier ending.

McGeorge Bundy: He did what he could on that issue. He pushed as hard as he knew how. He had no regrets on that.

Narrator: Only on this question he later believed that history might find that the United States, by its delay in stating its position on the Emperor, had prolonged the war.

McGeorge Bundy: That's right. He did think it was possible that you would reach that conclusion. It may be. I think that is an open question.

Narrator: On the 6th of July, the president set sail aboard the U.S.S. Augusta on his way to a summit meeting in Berlin with Joseph Stalin and British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. American troops had just fought to a very bloody victory on Okinawa. At the top of the president's agenda was ensuring that Stalin would keep his promise to President Roosevelt and send the Red Army to war against Japan within a month.

In his pocket the president carried the draft ultimatum given to him by Stimson, making it clear that the emperor could keep his throne if Japan surrendered. But at his side was his newly sworn-in Secretary of State, James Byrnes, who argued that the president would be crucified politically if he made a deal with the Japanese.

## **8. Control of the Bomb      45:29**

Harry Truman: We have the bomb. Now we have to make a decision as to whether we use that bomb on Japan or not. And that decision was up to me because I was the president of the United States, and we control the bomb.

Narrator: In July of 1945, the president could still have said no. He could have done so during the Allied meeting in Potsdam, the suburb of Berlin where he would first meet both Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin.

Truman privately compared Stalin to the boss of the Missouri political machine from which he had come and nicknamed him "Uncle Joe." Stalin privately called Truman "that noisy little shopkeeper."

The Allied leaders knew they had to deal with one another in the world after the war. Truman had postponed their meeting until he was pretty sure he had the bomb. In the New Mexico desert, the gadget, as the device to be tested was called, had been moved to ground zero. General Groves was pushing hard to test the plutonium bomb. If it worked, the United States could produce half a dozen or more, creating a nuclear arsenal, and giving President Truman enormous power in his dealings at Potsdam. At Potsdam the president wrote in his diary about his first meeting with Stalin.

Harry Truman: We had lunch, talked socially, put on a real show of drinking toasts to everyone, then pictures made in the back yard. I can deal with Stalin. He is honest but smart as hell. Most of the big points are settled. He'll be in the Jap war on August 15th. Fini Japs when that comes about.

Narrator: At this moment in Potsdam, before the bomb is a reality, the president seems to understand that he does have an important alternative to an American invasion of Japan. The Red Army's entry into the war might be the way to end it. He rejoices about the Russians in a letter to his wife.

Truman's letter: I've gotten what I came for. Stalin goes to war August 15th with no strings on it. I'll say that we'll end the war a year sooner now. Think of the kids who won't be killed. That is the important thing.

Narrator: At the New Mexico test range on the night of July 15th, the men of the Manhattan Project did not get much sleep. Thunderstorms threatened to postpone the test. One scientist bet on the chances that the blast would ignite the atmosphere. He offered a side wager on whether it would destroy the entire world or only New Mexico. And then just before dawn at 5:29 on the morning of the 16th the world changed forever.

New Mexico sent a coded cable to Potsdam: "Operated on this morning, results already exceed expectations. Doctor Groves pleased."

For President Truman at Potsdam, this was new-found power. James Byrnes called it "the gun behind the door." There was now no longer a need for politically damaging concessions to the Japanese, and overnight there was no more need for Stalin and his Red Army.

Harry Truman: Stalin doesn't know it, but I have an ace in the hole and another one showing, so unless he has 3 or 2 pairs, and I know he does not, we are sitting all right.

Narrator: James Byrnes went to work immediately on the draft ultimatum to the Japanese. He took out warnings about the Russians and the bomb, and he erased the crucial language suggesting the possibility that Japan might keep its Emperor.

Robert Messer: One gets a sense from these actions, interventions by Byrnes, and the acquiescence in it by Truman, that they were of a mind, and agreed, that as Byrnes put it at one point as recorded in his aide's diary, that the point was to get the war over as soon as possible so that the Russians, the Soviet Union, didn't "get in" so much "on the kill" of Japan.

Narrator: President Truman's diary raises the question of just how much he understood at the time.

Harry Truman: This weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10th. I have told the Secretary of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children.

Narrator: In fact, the target committee had made the decision to drop the bomb in the center of a city. Again the president:

Harry Truman: Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives. I'm sure they will not do that, but we will have given them the chance.

Narrator: In fact, there would be no explicit warning about the bomb to the Japanese, and the Potsdam ultimatum would be issued the day after the military ordered to drop the bomb.

Samuel Walker: This is one time in which I think Truman really needed an option paper and needed to call in his advisers who were knowledgeable about what the situation was in the war, what the situation was in Japan, and what the options were including the atomic bomb, and kind of say, "OK guys, you know, what should we do here? Here are the options. We can do this, or we cannot do this, but let's talk about this and weigh the options and look beyond, and see what's going to happen, or what we think might happen as a result of using different options."

Narrator: Why did no one apparently sit down and say, "Why rush with this? We want to reconsider this. We want to think about this again?"

McGeorge Bundy: I'd ask the question the other way around. That would have been the exception, I think, here. I think the truth of the matter is that the notion that you have a very powerful new weapon, which can shorten the war, is controlling and compelling. Looking behind that, they would say, Colonel Stimson, if he were here now, he would grab my elbow reminding me that he had, that they had looked at the bomb, that the committee had recommended that it be used against workers' dwellings, against the city. The matter had been thought through, and the notion that you hit fast, if you're going to hit, was already settled. And Harry Truman, an artillery captain, too, felt the same way.

Harry Truman: I casually mentioned to Stalin that we had a new weapon of unusual destructive force. The Russian premier showed no special interest.

Narrator: Actually, Joseph Stalin knew about the American bomb long before Harry Truman. He had spies at Los Alamos in New Mexico. But he did not know the bomb would be dropped on Japan. And he would be stunned when he heard the news.

President Truman was now in a hurry to leave Potsdam, according to James Byrnes' press aide, so he wouldn't have to tell Stalin why he hadn't kept his ally informed about the bomb. Once on board the U.S.S. Augusta, Byrnes' aide would add this:

Byrnes' aid: The president took Byrnes by the arm and said, "Come on, Jimmy, lets go below and have a drink. If these sons of bitches want to see me again, they will have to come to Washington."

Narrator: The bomb would be dropped on Hiroshima four days later.

William Lanouette: I think the moral ambiguities in the use of the bomb come down to the question of when we used it and when we needed it to save casualties. Why did we use two bombs in August to prepare for an invasion in November when they were the only two bombs we had? We assumed there would be a third one in two weeks, and a fourth one two weeks after that, but we weren't really sure. And the fact that we used those two in such a hurry, I think, speaks to Byrnes' concerns about the Russians rather than Truman's concerns about the casualties.

Narrator: If proof were needed that the bomb had a momentum of its own, consider that even before the successful test of the plutonium bomb, the smaller uranium bomb "Little Boy," which scientists were certain would work without a test, had already left Los Alamos. Its voyage to Tinian Island 1,500 miles from Japan would take ten days. The order to use the bomb was issued only as an afterthought because the Air Force general in charge would not drop an atomic bomb without a written order.

The written order to drop the bomb, written by Groves, was signed by Stimson, not the president: The 509th will deliver its first special bomb as soon as weather will permit visual bombing at or about August 3, 1945 on one of the targets. Additional bombs will be delivered on the above targets as soon as made ready by the project staff.

Narrator: President Truman would later claim that he gave the order to drop the atomic bomb only after the Japanese rejected his Potsdam warning. The truth is that the order to drop the bomb was cabled from Potsdam the day before, and the president did not sign it.

Robert Maddox (author): There's no reason to believe Truman ever saw that order. He would later say in his memoirs that he consulted with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and then had the order drawn up. There's no record at all that he ever met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Narrator: So he may never even have seen the order?

Robert Maddox: There's no indication that it was shown to Truman. His approval was not asked for.

Narrator: The order was written by General Groves and signed by Colonel Stimson. In it, Groves gave himself full authority to use atomic bombs repeatedly as soon as they could be made ready. August the 4th: On Tinian Island, the crew chosen to fly the Enola Gay mission were briefed. No one mentioned the words atomic bomb. Bob Caron the tail gunner would remember it this way:

Bob Caron: There were a lot of scientists with us. They had some movie film, but the projector broke down, but they had some slides. We knew it was going to be something big. We saw pictures of the test explosion at Trinity Site in

Alamogordo. They were just still pictures and slides, but it was breathtaking. The only way you could think of it was “What the hell is this?”

## 9. The US Uses the Bomb 56:40

Harry Truman: It was a question of saving hundreds of thousands of American lives. At 2:45 a.m. the Enola Gay cleared the runway on the special bombing mission with 10,000 pounds of atomic bomb called, “Little Boy” aboard.

Narrator: The mission pilot was Colonel Paul Tibbetts.

Paul Tibbetts: We got off at about 3:00 in the morning. We felt that it was our lucky day. We knew it was as we made the final approach towards Hiroshima, which the navigator hit right on the button. I could clearly see the city of Hiroshima within my bomb sites.

Narrator: August 6, 1945, 8:15 a.m.

Witness in Hiroshima 1: There was an extraordinary flash, an eye crushing flash. Then came the tremendous roar. I felt something strange on my face. Then I was shocked by the feeling that the skin on my face had come off and the hands and the arms too. It was now dark like dusk. Everything was vague and hazy as if a mist had covered my eyes. I wondered if I had lost my senses.

Witness in Hiroshima 2: At that moment a kind of panic began to well up from somewhere in the crowd. At first one voice then another began passing along the message. It’s gasoline. The Americans are dumping gasoline on us.

Narrator: At least 75,000 people were killed instantly. The exact number of dead will never be clear because whole families, whole neighborhoods were wiped out by the bomb. No one knows precisely how many died from the effects of radiation in the months and years to come. The bomb had been detonated directly above its target, the center of the city.

Two days later more than one and half million Red Army troops attacked the Japanese forces in China. Stalin rushed to get into the war before the new weapon could end it. The Japanese were no match for the Red Army.

On Tinian, the plutonium bomb, “Fat Man,” was being made ready. The second atomic bombing had been scheduled for the 11th of August, but bad weather was forecast over Japan and General Groves wanted to make sure that the plutonium bomb was “field-tested” before the war was over.

In Tokyo, the shock that Russia had entered the war forced military hardliners to begin talking surrender. They were still arguing on the morning of August the 9th. At 11:02 a.m., the second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. There might have been a moment when the bombing of Nagasaki could have been stopped or at least delayed, but no second order from the president was needed to drop the second bomb.

William Lanouette: The first one had been dropped. The second one had been dropped. We knew we’d have another one in a couple of weeks, and before he had heard the response of the Japanese about their surrender he said, “Don’t use that third bomb. I don’t want to kill any more women and children.” In that sense Truman finally confronted the reality of the bomb.

Narrator: On the 15th of August, the emperor broadcast a message to the Japanese people. They had never before heard his voice. He told them Japan would surrender.

Harry Truman (holding the surrender transcript): I deem this reply a full acceptance of the Potsdam declaration, which specifies the unconditional surrender of Japan. In the reply there is no qualification.

Narrator: In the end, President Truman did accept a conditional surrender. He just called it unconditional. Emperor Hirohito would remain ceremonial head of the Japanese nation until his death 44 years later. Finally, the war was over. Americans had fought and won a truly heroic victory. The story most of us know ends there.

## 10. The Aftermath 1:01:45

A few months after the war, in a public opinion poll, almost 80% of the people endorsed dropping the bomb on Japanese cities. America had a nuclear monopoly and even as new bombs were tested, debate over their use was limited. It would take a year after the war ended for the debate to sharpen, and then only when the entire issue of *New Yorker* magazine was devoted to a report by John Hersey entitled simply, "Hiroshima." The article stunned Americans who had known little about the bomb. It was broadcast nationwide on ABC Radio.

Excerpt from "Hiroshima": Hundreds and hundreds were fleeing and every one of them seemed to be hurt in some way. Eyebrows of some were burned off and skin from their faces and hands. Some were vomiting as they walked. Many were naked or in shreds of clothing. Many, although injured themselves, reported relatives who were worse off. Almost all had their heads bowed, looked straight ahead, were silent, and showed no expression whatever.

Narrator: Hersey's words drew pictures of the bomb's victims that Americans still could not see. Films and photographs had been confiscated by the U.S. Occupation Forces. Images like these were censored then, and they were among the first to be removed from the Smithsonian this year when its planned anniversary exhibit came under attack.

In 1946, facing a rising tide of questions and criticism, the atomic decision makers would feel obliged to rewrite history. The president himself wrote to his ailing former Secretary of War.

Harry Truman: There has been a great deal of conversation about how the conclusion was reached to drop the bomb and there has been some indication that the decision was arrived at hurriedly and without consideration. I think you know the facts of the situation better than anybody, and I would like for you to straighten out the record on it.

Narrator: And so Colonel Stimson was recruited to lend his name and reputation to that article, putting forth the official view of why the bomb was dropped. The article claimed the atomic decision was "carefully considered" and offered little hint that Colonel Stimson, at least, was haunted by the civilian deaths.

James Hershberg (historian): That article appeared in the February 1947 issue of *Harper's Magazine*. It was arguably the most significant magazine article to appear during the history of the Cold War because it took what had been a growing debate over the decision to use the bomb in Japan and really cut it short.

Narrator: The most enduring single fiction to grow out of the *Harper's* article was the notion most of us have long believed: that one million American lives were saved by the bomb. There is no documentary evidence as to where the number came from. But McGeorge Bundy, at 26, was the ghostwriter for the article that appeared in Colonel Stimson's name.

McGeorge Bundy: If you read it carefully, what it says is if the war had gone on to a point where we would have to make the landing, I was informed that we could expect up to a million casualties, something like that, not deaths, casualties. So that's nothing but his picture of the worst that could happen, if we can't get this war ended. It's not a claim that there would have been a million casualties.

Narrator: In 1952, in a letter which became part of the official Air Force history of the war, President Truman revised his estimates of American casualties upward until they too matched the one million first cited in the *Harper's* article.

Samuel Walker: The casualty figures have always been a big part of the debate, so I think it's important to get the casualty figures right to begin with, but also to recognize that, I think, Truman would have used the bomb if it had been far fewer casualties than he later said it would have caused, but even far fewer than what his advisers were saying in the



summer of 1945. I think if somebody said to Truman, "Mr. President, you have a choice between dropping the bomb and saving, say, a 1,000 American lives," he would have said, "Do it. Drop the bomb." I'm not sure at what number Truman would have said, "Well, wait let's stop and think about this." But my guess is that it would have been a fairly small number.

William Lanouette: The generation that fought World War II sees the war as having two bookends, Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima. The viciousness of Pearl Harbor is all but satisfied by the viciousness of Hiroshima. The ambiguity is something we are really not prepared for. We've all lived in the shadow of the mushroom cloud. We've all prepared through Civil Defense for some kind of a holocaust, and luckily it has never occurred, so we know how awful this thing can be, but I think we've never confronted the fact that we alone, and without a clear justification militarily, decided to use this thing as quickly as we could on inhabited cities.

Narrator: The controversy about using the bomb is not going to be put to rest in this anniversary year [1995]. For one thing, it is hard for people who didn't live through the war to understand how much it meant to the men who believe their lives were spared because it was dropped. At the same time, it is clear there are people who don't want to contemplate the moral questions that are also part of the bomb's legacy. It's unfortunate, we think, that some veterans' organizations and some politicians felt the need to bully our most important national museum so that the whole story of Hiroshima is not represented here. That is not fair to history or to the rest of us. After all, freedom of discussion was one of the ideals that Americans fought and died for.

I'm Peter Jennings. Good night.