

Truman's decision to use the Atom Bomb:

A Classroom Debate



Author: Joy Lyman, ALPL

Grade Levels: 9-12

Purpose: This two class-period lesson plan is designed to develop students' skills in historical analysis, research and debate. Students will study the rationale behind President Harry S. Truman's use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to force Japan's unconditional surrender, and will also learn of the opposing views on the subject. In the process, they will hone their research, historical analysis, and debating skills. Students will hear the views of several veterans on the subject (primary source), and will also study other historical documents, primary sources and more contemporary critiques on the subject.

Objectives: Upon completing the activities presented in this Resource Guide, students will:

- Use primary sources to gather information, and interpret them in conjunction with other primary and secondary sources on the subject,
- Understand the complexity of the issues surrounding the use of the atomic bomb,
- Develop a more in-depth knowledge of the United States' role during World War II,
- Refine historical debate skills.

Materials:

Internet access, audio/video equipment for listening to and watching interview clips, printed copies of materials to be used in the lesson.

Illinois State Learning Standards:

Early High School:

SS.16.A.4b: Compare competing historical interpretations of an event.

SS.14.E.4: Analyze historical trends of United States foreign policy (e.g., emergence as a world leader - military, industrial, financial).

Late High School:

SS.16.A.5b: Explain the tentative nature of historical interpretations.

SS.16.B.5a: Analyze worldwide consequences of isolated political events, including the events triggering the Napoleonic Wars and World Wars I and II.

SS.14.D.5: Interpret a variety of public policies and issues from the perspectives of different individuals and groups.



Early High School:

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.9-10.9

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

Late High School:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Background Information:

The use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II was a controversial choice that remains a topic of debate today. It brought an end to the bloody war in the Pacific, but also ushered in a new and frightening era of warfare. Mankind was now capable of destroying itself. The existence of massive nuclear arsenals defined the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union for the next fifty years.

The development of the bombs began in 1939 with the Manhattan Project, a collaboration between the United States, Canada and Great Britain. The designers knew they were in a race with both Germany and Japan, who had their own programs. There was a test deployment in New Mexico on July 16th, 1945, before the eventual bombing of Hiroshima (August 6th, 1945) and Nagasaki (August 9th, 1945).

The casualty figures are also contested, but most estimate them to be approximately 135,000 for Hiroshima and 64,000 for Nagasaki. This contrasts with the estimates of the lives saved, (both Allied and Japanese) if the bombs had not been used and the invasion of the Japanese homeland had gone on as planned.

The decision to drop the bomb was opposed by some during the war, people who wanted to seek another way to end the war that did not involve such a large civilian death toll. But, after a long war, the vast majority of Americans supported Truman's decision to use the bomb, based on the very high casualty estimates for the invasion of Japan. Planners predicted that both American and Japanese lives would be saved if the atomic bomb did indeed force the Japanese to surrender.

Activity:

The line of inquiry for this lesson is “Should the United States have dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and was their use justified?”

Day One:

- Have students look at the political cartoons and other images included in this lesson plan (p.10), and write their thoughts and the answer to the above question on the “Reactions” sheet.
- Have a short discussion on the images, emphasizing the need for evidence to support claims.
- Assign the students a position on the topic, based on the position papers on p. 8-9 of this lesson plan. The students may use the position papers as a starting point if needed.
- Hand out the “Debate Position Organizer”
- Give students time to come up with a group thesis statement on the use of the bombs.
- Listen to the excerpts and fill in the organizer with information from the interviews that fit their position.
- Hand out copies of the primary documents included in this lesson plan and any others you find useful (check out additional resources below!).
- Students will read the documents, make notes, and record information on their “Debate Position Organizer.”

Day Two:

- Allow students a short time to meet as a group to establish a plan for the debate.
- Hand out the “Debate Information Notetaker.” Students should take note of their opponents’ views and plan ways to refute them.
- Have a short break in the middle of the debate for students to regroup to come up with new arguments.
- The teacher will moderate using the questions to the right, and any additional questions.
- At the end of the debate, hand out the “Decisions” sheet, and have each student cast a vote for what action should be taken.

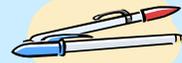
Assessment: Collect all student work, including the Reactions, Organizer, Note-taker, and Decisions sheets. Use of evidence and citations in these will help you evaluate student understanding, especially for those students who did not speak much in the debate.

Additional Resources:

- More primary resources: <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Hiroshima/>
- More on the Manhattan Project: <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/MED/>
- More primary resources: http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/ See especially Petition to the President dtd July 17, 1945
- Truman’s Announcement: <http://www.c-span.org/video/?294914-1/president-truman-speech-bombing->

Tips and Suggestions:

- * Make sure students have a solid foundational understanding of World War II and the Manhattan Project before launching into this lesson.
- * For a less complex version of this lesson, consider splitting students into two positions rather than four.
- * Have the students conduct their research as homework, allowing you to spend less time in class working up to the debate.
- * Encourage students to revise their thesis statement as needed as they conduct their research.
- * Organize the debate in a way that makes sense to you, and feel free to make alterations or add questions!
- * Consider having students enter their opinions on <http://www.debate.org/opinions/was-the-bombing-of-hiroshima-and-nagasaki-justified>
- * Consider showing an excerpt of the *End Game* episode of World War II in HD:



Debate Questions:

1. Should the US have used the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Why or why not? State your group’s position.
2. Did the U.S. pick the right targets for the bombs? Why do you think that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were picked?
3. What alternatives were there to dropping the bombs? Would they or wouldn’t they have been effective?
4. Some have argued that not enough time was allowed after the Hiroshima bombing for the Japanese to respond, and that using it on Nagasaki was not necessary. Do you agree?
5. How did American citizens feel about the use of the bomb?
6. How did Japanese citizens feel about the use of the bomb?
7. Contemporary: What may happen in the Middle East if Iran becomes a nuclear power?

Interviews:



Timuel Black: A WWII veteran who grew up in Chicago's Black Belt during the 1920s and '30s, and fought in Europe with the U.S. Army in 1944-1945.

Interview: [Atomic Bomb](#) (0:55)

Transcript: [Click here](#)

Ralph Contreras: A World War era Marine who served with the 6th Marine Division at Guam and Okinawa.

Interview: [Atomic Bomb](#) (0:45)

Transcript: [Click here](#)



Joyce Webb: One of the founders of the Carbondale, Illinois Women's Center, and a supporter of the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Interview: [Atomic Bomb](#) (1:17)

Transcript: [Click here](#)

Donald Palmer: A World War II Navy veteran.

Interview: [Atomic Bomb](#) (0:50)

Transcript: [Click here](#)



Warren Musch: A Marine Intelligence Officer during WW II, and veteran of the battle of Iwo Jima.

Interview: [Atomic Bomb](#) (1:30)

Transcript: [Click here](#)

Winton Solberg: An Infantry lieutenant in Europe during WW II

Interview: [Atomic Bomb](#) (2:42)

Transcript: [Click here](#)



Harold Steele: U.S. Army Infantry lieutenant in the European theater during WW II

Interview: [Atomic Bomb](#) (2:00)

Transcript: [Click here](#)

Vincent Speranza: A WWII paratrooper with the 101st Airborne and a veteran of the Battle of Bastogne.

Interview: [Atomic Bomb](#) (2:05)

Transcript: [Click here](#)



Reactions:

- What did you see in the images?
- What did you think about the images?
- Which image stood out to you the most? Why?

Question of the Day:

“Should the United States have used the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?
Why or why not?”

Decisions:

Which argument did you end up agreeing with? Why? Give at least two pieces of evidence to back up your position.

Debate Position Organizer

What side of the Debate are you on?

Group Thesis Statement:

Source:

Evidence:

Analysis/Argument:

Source:

Evidence:

Analysis/Argument:

Source:

Evidence:

Analysis/Argument:

Debate Information Notetaker:

Group:	Position:	Evidence/Support: How I can refute their argument:
Group:	Position:	Evidence/Support: How I can refute their argument:
Group:	Position:	Evidence/Support: How I can refute their argument:
Group:	Position:	Evidence/Support: How I can refute their argument:

Position Papers:

Position One: The Bomb Will Save Lives

By the time the atomic bombs were dropped in Japan, the United States had been at war for almost four years, and the other Allies and Axis countries for longer than that. Soldiers who had been fighting in the Pacific Theatre of the war saw the ruthlessness of the Japanese forces, and their determination to fight to the death. At places like Iwo Jima and Okinawa, American soldiers saw first hand the fanaticism of the average Japanese soldier who would rather commit suicide than surrender to the Americans. At Okinawa, even many Japanese civilians committed suicide rather than face surrender. If the Allied forces invaded Japan, casualties were projected to be very high on both sides, including the deaths of all the Allied prisoners of war in Japan, who Field Marshal Hisaichi Terauchi promised to kill upon invasion. Finally, with the Allied blockade tightening, the Japanese people were struggling to survive on a very meager diet, with malnutrition running rampant. The use of the bomb cut that suffering short.

Additional Resources:

- Karl T. Compton on the use of the bomb: <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/46dec/compton.htm>
- Truman on the use of the bomb: http://www.trumanlibrary.org/flip_books/index.php?collectionid=ihow&groupid=3707&tldate=1963-07-30

Position Two: The Bomb Will Put Us in a Position of Power

Although the Soviet Union had declared war against Japan by this time, the beginnings of Cold War tensions were already brewing. The world powers were racing to develop atomic technology. The United States (in conjunction with the United Kingdom and Canada) were the first to develop a usable atomic bomb, and if we did not use it first, then we would not be able to maintain our position of power on the world stage. Even if we did not use the bomb on land, we should have used it on the ocean nearby in order to let the Japanese and Soviets know of our atomic capabilities. If we wouldn't have used the bomb first, then another country would have used one eventually, and our power would have been questioned.

Additional Resources:

- The bomb as the beginning of the Cold War: http://www.johndclare.net/cold_war5.htm
- Tensions with the USSR: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/atomic>

Position Papers:

Position Three: We Could Find another Way to End the War

When the public found out about the use of the bomb, some thought that the war could have come to a conclusion without using the bomb. At Potsdam, the decision to give the Japanese an ultimatum was made, telling them to surrender immediately or face "prompt and utter destruction", a threat which did not mention the atomic bomb. This was not enough, however. The Americans and Japanese could have found negotiation terms that were agreeable to both sides - for example, lifting the unconditional surrender requirement and allowing for a constitutional monarchy. We could have left more time after Potsdam to consider the impact that the atomic bomb would have. Some have argued that we could have demonstrated the power of the bomb over an unpopulated area, and in that way, convince the Japanese to surrender. Others have argued that we did not give enough time in between Hiroshima and Nagasaki to allow the Japanese government to make the decision to surrender. There is evidence that some Japanese were considering surrender at the time that the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.

Additional Resources:

- Arguments against the use of the bomb: http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/documents/index.php?documentdate=1945-07-17&documentid=79&studycollectionid=abomb&pagenumber=1
- Dwight D. Eisenhower on the use of the bomb: <http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/key-issues/nuclear-weapons/history/pre-cold-war/hiroshima-nagasaki/opinion-eisenhower-bomb.htm>
- Bombs could have been avoided: http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v16/v16n3p-4_Weber.html

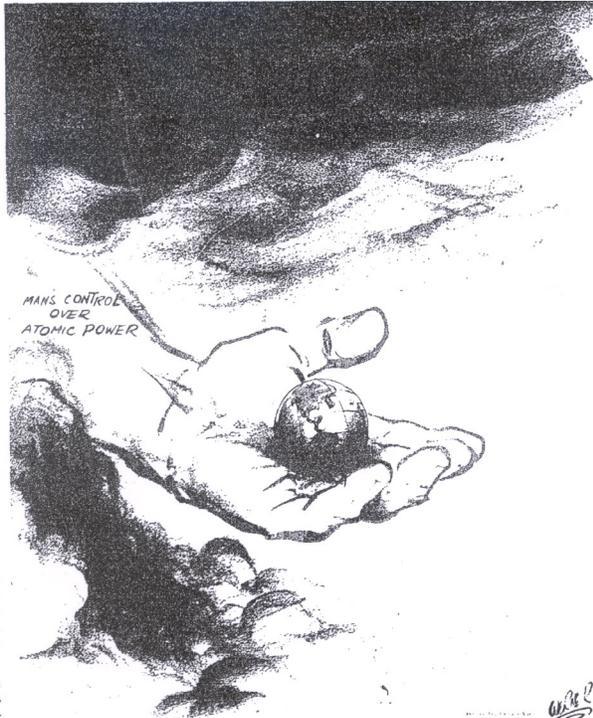
Position Four: The Bombs Caused Too Many Civilian Casualties

Use of the bomb caused over a hundred thousand civilian deaths and casualties. According to military planners, both Hiroshima and Nagasaki were legitimate strategic targets, but the civilian casualties in both cities greatly outnumbered the military ones. The bomb initially killed sixty to eighty thousand people in Hiroshima and about 40,000 people in Nagasaki. (Indeed, some of the people killed in the Hiroshima blast were American prisoners of war.) The final death toll was higher, however, after the effects of radiation are taken into account. About 185,000 people died due to the atomic bombings. The use of such devastating weaponry on the civilian population of Japan was unnecessary. Truman still maintained in 1959 that the bombs saved "millions of lives," but some historians have argued that these high casualty estimates are unlikely, and so the high death toll was not worth it. Finally, by using atomic bombs to end WW II, the world has crossed a very dangerous threshold. Mankind now possesses the power to destroy ourselves.

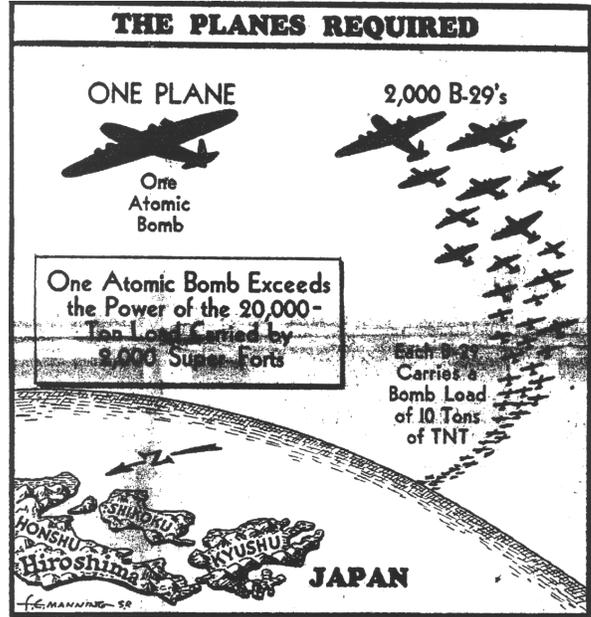
Additional Resources:

- Robert J. Oppenheimer on the use of the bomb: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmxIptS3cw>
- Arguments against the use of the bomb: <http://www.authentichistory.com/1939-1945/1-war/4-Pacific/4-abombdecision/3-against/>
- Photos of the cities and victims: <http://www.gensuikin.org/english/photo.html>

Resources:



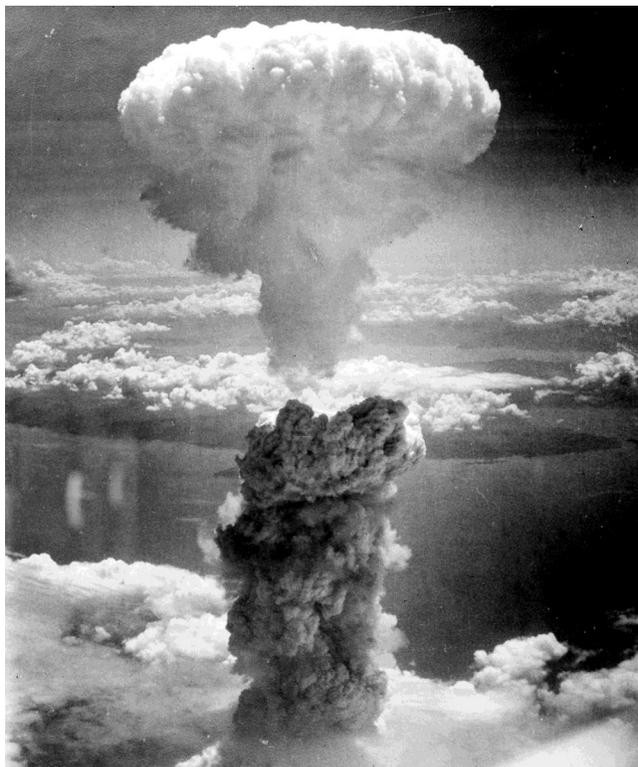
To New Heights or Complete Destruction?
The Chicago Sun, August 8, 1945



The Chicago Sun, August 7th, 1945



The Photographs of Yosuke Yamahata



<http://archives.starbulletin.com/2007/08/05/news/story03.html>



The Chicago Tribune, August 7th, 1945

Newspaper Articles

Excerpts from *Atomic Bomb Brings to U.S. An Immense Responsibility*

By Maj. George Fielding Eliot

The Chicago Sun, August 9th, 1945

The harnessing of atomic energy to the uses of man may well prove the most important scientific discovery of all time. For good or ill it may well alter the history of the human race.

But for the moment, the industrial and hence the social changes which may be brought about by this primal power be well in the future. With its military uses we are immediately concerned, because it is to military ends that its discovery is first being turned.

The military uses of atomic power may be considered under two heads: (1) Its immediate application to the Japanese War (2) Its effect on the maintenance of peace by the United Nations organization.

....

The purpose may therefore be to give the Japanese an immediate foretaste of what is coming to them later, as additional supplies of the atomic bombs become available.

It looks as though the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima is a part of a scheduled operation directed against the will to fight of the Japanese.

First there was the three-power ultimatum; then the scheduled bombing of Japanese cities "by roster"; then the Potsdam communiqué outlining the fate which the German people brought upon themselves by obeying their warlords to the bitter end; now the announcement of the atomic bomb and its first use against Hiroshima.

....

It may be well to consider at this point what is going to happen when the Japanese war is ended. We may assume that the atomic bomb will hasten the end of the war, at least, if it does not terminate it abruptly. What then?

The free peoples of the world now have in their possession a weapon so terrible that for the present, at least, nothing can stand against it.

The saving grace in this situation, the outward and visible sign of God's merciful providence, is that this weapon is in the hands of the American, British and Canadian peoples, and not in the hands of a Hitler or a Japanese warlord.

....

The immense responsibility which now lies on the shoulders of those peoples whose representatives must make the decisions suggested by the President can handle be overemphasized. We must realize what this responsibility means.

No scientific discovery, no mere instrument will save us from ourselves. If we are dales to our duty, if we are as a nation to stupid, too hesitant or too indifferent to make use of what we have for the benefit of mankind. In the last analysis, the basic factor is still the human factor.

Free we are and free we are determined to remain. But we cannot remain so just by saying so. We have seen the sacrifices which our freedom has demanded of us in two great wars because we had not the wit and energy to take the steps which might have prevented them.

....

We have had our lesson, we have paid a bitter price for it and now we have a new and awe-inspiring opportunity to establish peace and to defend it.

But to do that we must rise superior in our hearts and our souls to the frightful forces our minds have unleashed on this shrinking planet- forces which may be turned to our use or to our destruction. The choice is ours.

Newspaper Articles Continued

The Story of our Secret Weapon:

All Industries to Be Leveled Unless Foe Quits, U.S. Vows

The Chicago Sun, Published August 7th, 1945

Washington, Aug. 6.- An atomic bomb, a cosmic weapon unleashing the most dreadful force ever felt on the face of the earth, was dropped by the United States Air Force on Japan last night.

The bomb, the weapon which Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany sought but never found, was America's answer to Japan's rejection of the Potsdam "surrender or be destroyed" ultimatum.

Only one bomb was dropped.

But it will be followed by others to level all Japanese industry above ground unless Japan drops its weapons and surrenders. That promise was made today by President Truman in announcing the epochal event.

And tonight every Allied radio transmitter capable of reaching Japan was blaring that warning to the Japanese government and its bomb-dazed people.

The force and the implications of the new weapon of America and its Allies staggered the imagination. The scientists who perfected it described it as heralding "the age of atomic energy," and providing a weapon so dreadful in its destructive force that "it may be the instrumentality to end all major wars."

More Power Than 20,000 Tons of TNT

President Truman described it as having "more power than 20,000 pounds of TNT" and "more than 2,000 times the blast power of the British 'Grand Slam'," a 22,000-pound earthshaker so devastating that it obliterated an entire granite island in the British Channel when first tested by the British government.

Secretary of War Stimson said that this most terrible of all weapons is only the first step—that there is sound scientific reason to expect that research will produce atomic bombs "very much more powerful than the atomic bombs now at hand."

So portentous was the development, not only for war, but also for peace, that President Truman announced that technical formulas governing atomic explosive production and its military applications must be guarded as a desperately important secret until "further examination of possible methods of protecting us and the rest of the world from the danger of sudden destruction."

Alternative is Pointed Out

Mr. Truman promised that unless the Japanese warlords submit to the July 25 ultimatum of Potsdam, the full force of the atomic weapon will be unleashed in the most destructive man-made cataclysm of history.

"We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city," he said in a statement that was being beamed by a hundred radio stations to Japan.

Destruction Promised

"We shall destroy their docks, their factories and their communications. Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan's power to make war."

Japs Warned to Submit Now

"It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam," he continued. "Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth.

"Behind the air attack will follow sea and land forces in such numbers and power as they have not yet seen and with the fighting skill of which they are already aware."

Disclosure is Revolutionary

The President's disclosure of the new weapon was probably without precedent in the history of nations in its dramatic and breath-taking overtones. In long range implications, the disclosure dwarfed even the invention of ironclad war vessels in the American Civil War—A development which revolutionized sea warfare. Mr. Truman went into cosmic universal terms to describe the new bomb.

"It is an atomic bomb," he said. "It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East."

Newspaper Articles Continued

Race with Nazis Revealed

The President's statement was the first chilling revelation that the United States and its Allies had been engaged in a race with its enemies- notably Germany- in development of this new weapon.

The United States, after expending 2,000,000,000 in history's greatest concentration of scientific research, won the race.

If the United States had lost, the Axis might have won the war. But Secretary of War Stimson said that there is no reason to believe that Japan now might be able to develop a similar weapon.

"With the exception of the United Kingdom and Canada, the status of work in this field in other countries is not fully known," said Stimson. "But we are convinced that Japan will not be in a position to use an atomic bomb in this war."

Nazi Danger Ended

"While it is known that Germany was working feverishly in an attempt to develop such a weapon, her complete defeat and occupation have now removed that source of danger.

"Thus it was evident when the war began that the development of atomic energy for war purposes would occur in the near future and it was a question of which nations would control the discovery."

The United States and Great Britain won in that secret race with destiny.

Effect is Estimated

But on the basis of President Trumann's comparison of the force of the bomb to 20,000 tons of TNT, the effect of that single bomb on Hiroshima should have been equal to a mass attack of 2,000 Superfortresses- each unloading their maximum of approximately 10 tons, or 20,000 pounds, of TNT. No such concentration of Superfortresses has yet become possible or is likely to become possible in the Pacific immediately.

And even larger atomic bombs are in prospect. The one dropped last night apparently was not tremendous in size.

President Weighs Use

It was reported that Mr. Truman had given his assent to use of this weapon only after the most conscience searching consideration, during which Secretary of State Byrnes explored the full implications which might arise from the first use of such a weapon by the United States.

From the President's reference to the Potsdam Ultimatum, it appeared highly probable that use of the weapon was discussed at the Potsdam conference. The British government, whose scientist helped perfect the invention, was fully informed on its development. There was no indication here whether or not Russia was equally well-informed.

Bomb Used At Once

Still, from the official record published today, it was obvious that the United States permitted no delay to occur between perfection of the weapon and its use against Japan to bring that war-like enemy to its knees and thus save American lives.

Only 21 days passed between the first successful test of the cosmic bomb at an isolated laboratory in New Mexico and its first war use at Hiroshima.

Peace Possibilities Seen

Although all emphasis today was on the use of the atomic explosion for war, it had even more breathtaking potentialities for peace.

Scientists here sad that two or three grams of uranium, from which the explosion of an atom bomb develops, could develop enough power, if it's forcer were regulated, to send a great ocean liner to Europe from new York and return. Such a unit of material would be larger than a man's little fingernail.

Energy Controlled

Stimson revealed that this peacetime possibility is being explored, and that controlled energy from atomic disintegration already is being produced. At this point, however, it is still not capable of supplanting coal, water, and oil as the fundamental sources of power. But that substitute may not be far off.

Its actual realization might precipitate the world into an industrial period which would overshadow the industrial revolution that restored the European economy after the French revolution.