At times leaders have to make decisions that are unpopular with others. They must consider losses and determine what is the greater good. President Harry Truman found himself in this position when determining whether to drop the bomb. Despite the opposition of many, President Harry S. Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb was for the greater good of the country as well as its citizens.

The world’s attention was quickly drawn to the atomic bomb when news of its development became public. In early 1939, “the world’s scientific community discovered that German physicists had learned the secrets of splitting a uranium atom” and “fears soon spread over the possibility of Nazi scientists utilizing that energy to produce a bomb capable of unspeakable destruction” (Sheinkin 15). The United States immediately began to work on an atomic bomb of its own. In May 1945 in a pre-test, a 100-ton bomb was exploded in Los Alamos, New Mexico (Sheinkin 24). At Albert Einstein’s recommendation, President Roosevelt began development of the program, and in late 1941, the Manhattan Project was established. Funds were allocated and the project proceeded quickly:

Secrecy was paramount. Neither the Germans nor the Japanese could learn of the project. Roosevelt and Churchill also agreed that Stalin would be kept in the dark. Consequently, there was no public awareness or debate. Keeping 120,000 people quiet would be impossible; therefore, only a small privileged cadre of inner scientist and officials knew about the atomic bomb’s development. In fact, Vice-President Truman had never heard of the Manhattan Project until he became President Truman. (Sheinkin 45)

Once he became President, with the war escalating on two fronts, he made the decision to make use of this powerful weapon of war.

President Truman’s decision to drop the bomb caused Japan to surrender and ended the war more quickly than it would have otherwise. With the city of Tokyo destroyed by U.S. bombing, Japan still
resisted. So, the city of Hiroshima was chosen as our country’s next target, and Truman felt the bomb was our best option. Hiroshima was an import port in industrial area (Bernstein). On August 6, 1945, the American bomber Enola Gay dropped a five-ton bomb over this Japanese city. With the dropping of the bomb “Little Boy,” devastation was brought to Hiroshima. As many as 80,000 people were killed as a direct result of the blast, and another 35,000 had been injured. At least another 60,000 died before the year ended (“United States”). Despite this, Japan continued to resist surrender. Soon after, a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. Again Japan suffered great loss and finally admitted defeat. Emperor Hirohito met with his supreme war council on August 9th, and with great emotion the emperor decided to accept the Potsdam Declaration which called for the surrender of all Japanese armed forces during World War II. His council was in agreement, and August 10 the message was sent to the U.S. (“United States”). As he had hoped, Truman saw the atomic bomb bring about a rapid end to the war with Japan.

Through the use of the bomb, Truman maintained the strong position of the United States in the world’s eyes. Our nation was particularly aware of the role of the Soviet Union in the world at that time.

By the middle of 1945, the Soviet Union was showing plans to enter the war in the Pacific in order to be a power player in that area after the war. Although the United States didn’t feel it could prevent this completely, Truman didn’t threaten the Soviets with the bomb. He felt the face that we had the bomb would be threat enough to cause the Soviet Union to proceed with caution (Buckley, Hiroshima 54). The Soviet Union entered the war hoping for a foothold in Japan. Truman’s decision to use the bomb was important as it kept others aware of the potential for power we had through the bomb. The effect of the bomb was also felt through Europe as countries there looked to the U.S. for protection:

The fact of the bomb was useful in ensuring that Western Europe would rely on the United States to guarantee its security rather than seeking an outside accommodation with the Soviet Union, because even if the United States did not station large numbers of troops on the
continent, it could protect the region by placing it under the American “nuclear umbrella” of areas that the United States professed to be willing to use the bomb to defend. (Anderson 54)

With this increased dependence on us by other countries and nations, the United States maintained its strong presence in the world.

When Truman had been warned by some of his advisers that any attempt to invade Japan would result in enormous American casualties, he ordered that the new weapon be used to bring the war to a speedy end. Already the loss of life from the war was great, and it would only continue as stated by Karl Compton, part of a committee working on the development of the bomb. There would be even more casualties as they subdued the country of Japan. Based on the fierce reaction of on Iwo Jima and Okinawa as they fought to the death, we had no reason to believe that Japan would give up without the same type of struggle. U.S. General MacArthur felt that as many as 50,000 Americans as well as three times that many Japanese could lose their lives as they established beachheads in the area of Kyushu (Sheinkin 167). Truman realized he had to consider the lives of his soldiers first and foremost. To continue the war that the U.S. had been waging would have been costly, according to William Buckley of The National Review:

Nonetheless, I also believe that President Harry Truman’s decision to use the atomic bombs against Japan almost certainly saved lives. This is undoubtedly true if one accepts the arguments of U.S. leaders at the time; namely, that not using the atomic bomb would have forced the U.S. to launch a full invasion of Japan’s home islands, and this would have killed far more people than Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It’s impossible to know how many people would have perished if allied forces invaded Japan. However, given the stiff resistance U.S. and allied forces faced during the island-hopping campaign of the Pacific War, it would have been many, many times greater than the 200,000+ people that died from the atomic bombings. (54)
With the size of Japan and the various outlying islands that would also need to be destroyed, the lives of many U.S. soldiers would have been lost, and that was a sacrifice that President Truman was not ready to see happen.

The argument has been made that Japan was on the verge of surrendering anyway, that the loss of life with Hiroshima and Nagasaki was unnecessary. And with surrender, U.S. soldiers’ lives would be spared as well. Even with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, was Emperor Hirohito really ready to surrender? At the time, “the highest decision-making body [of Japan] was not even convened after Hiroshima. The cabinet was divided. The atomic bomb was effective enough that for the first time, cabinet decision-makers decided to really terminate the war. But on what conditions, they were totally divided” (Sullivan 167). It wasn’t until the second bomb “Fat Man” was dropped that Japan was able to agree on surrender. President Truman had to move forward to protect our nation.

By deciding to drop the atomic bomb, President Truman made the best decision for our nation, despite criticism from many. Even though Truman himself considered the atomic bomb ““the most terrible bomb in the history of the world” (“Harry S. Truman”) and hoped he would never have to use it, the day arrived when he felt he must. His decision was a necessary one, given the circumstances in the war with Japan, and he bore responsibility for his decision. Once his decision was made, he never apologized for what he did, yet he never shirked responsibility for his decision either. As he said himself, he would do the same thing again if faced with the situation. He chose not to use the bomb again in the future, but he did what he felt he had to do at the time. Hopefully this decision will never have to be made in our nation again although the threat of it remains on the forefront.
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