The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

The United States’ decision to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima was a diplomatic measure calculated to intimidate the Soviet Union in the post–Second–World–War era rather than a strictly military measure designed to force Japan's unconditional surrender.

Evaluate this statement using the documents and your knowledge of the military and diplomatic history of the years 1939 through 1947.

Write your recommendation to President Truman as to whether or not your group would advise using the Atomic Bomb – you must reference to the 8 documents+!

Document 1

Source: President Harry S. Truman

"I had then set up a committee of top men and had asked them to study with great care the implications the new weapons might have for us. It was their recommendation that the bomb be used against the enemy as soon as it could be done. They recommended further that it should be used without specific warning... I had realized, of course, that an atomic bomb explosion would inflict damage and casualties beyond imagination. On the other hand, the scientific advisors of the committee reported... that no technical demonstration they might propose, such as over a deserted island, would be likely to bring the war to an end. It had to be used against an enemy target.

The final decision of where and when to use the atomic bomb was up to me. Let there be no mistake about it. I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never doubted it should be used."

Question: Why did President Truman feel that the atomic bomb had to be used against enemy targets?
The surrender of Japan was not entirely the result of the two atomic bombs. We had hit some 60 Japanese cities with our regular H. E. (High Explosive) and incendiary bombs and, as a result of our raids, about 241,000 people had been killed, 313,000 wounded, and about 2,333,000 homes destroyed. Our B-29's had destroyed most of the Japanese industries and, with the laying of mines, which prevented the arrival of incoming cargoes of critical items, had made it impossible for Japan to carry on a large-scale war.... Accordingly, it always appeared to us that, atomic bomb or no atomic bomb, the Japanese were already on the verge of collapse.

**Question:** According to Gen. H.H. Arnold, was the atomic bomb needed? Why or why not?
"The face of war is the face of death; death is an inevitable part of every order that a wartime leader gives. The decision to use the atomic bomb was a decision that brought death to over a hundred thousand Japanese...."

"But this deliberate, premeditated destruction was our least abhorrent alternative. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki put an end to the Japanese war. It stopped the fire raids, and the strangling blockade; it ended the ghastly specter of a clash of great land armies. In this last great action of the Second World War we were given final proof that war is death."

**Question:** Why did Stimson think the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a terrible thing to do but better than any alternative?
Another item on which I ventured to advise President Truman involved the Soviet's intention to enter the Japanese war. I told him that since reports indicated the imminence of Japan's collapse, I deprecated the Red Army's engaging in that war. I foresaw certain difficulties arising out of such participation and suggested that, at the very least, we ought not to put ourselves in the position of requesting or begging for Soviet aid. It was my personal opinion that no power on earth could keep the Red Army out of that war unless victory came before they could get in.

**Question:** What was Dwight D. Eisenhower’s overall suggestion then?
Document 5

Source: Nuclear physicist Leo Szilard's recollection of a 1945 meeting between James Bymes and a group of concerned atomic scientists (1949)

The question of whether the bomb should be used in the war against Japan came up for discussion. Mr. Bymes did not argue that it was necessary to use the bomb against the cities of Japan in order to win the war. He knew at that time, as the rest of the Government knew, that Japan was essentially defeated and that we could win the war in another six months. At that time Mr. Byrnes was much concerned about the spreading of Russian influence in Europe.... Mr. Byrnes' concern about Russia I fully shared, but his view that our possessing and demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable in Europe I was not able to share. Indeed I could hardly imagine any premise more false and disastrous upon which to base our policy, and I was dismayed when a few weeks later I learned that he was to be our Secretary of State.

Question: Why was Leo Szilard and other nuclear physicists worried?
"The view where a moment before all had been so bright and sunny was now dark and hazy… What had happened? All over the right side of my body I was bleeding… My private nurse set about examining my wounds without speaking a word. No one spoke… Why was everyone so quiet? The heat finally became too intense to endure… Those who could fled; those who could not perished…

Hiroshima was no longer a city but a burned-over prairie. To the east and to the west everything was flattened. The distant mountains seemed nearer than I could ever remember… How small Hiroshima was with its houses gone."

**Question:** What observations did the doctor make about the effects of the bombing on his city?
Images of Nagasaki, 1945
Source: Yamahata photographs © Shogo Yamahata, The Day After the Nagasaki Bombing. The Japan Peace Museum (www.peace-museum.org)

Question: Describe the effects of the bombing, as seen in these photographs.
Source: Harry S Truman, radio address (August 1945)

I realize the tragic significance of the atomic bomb.

Its production and its use were not lightly undertaken by this Government. But we knew that our enemies were on the search for it. We know now how close they were to finding it. And we know the disaster which would come to this nation, and to all peaceful nations, to all civilizations, if they had found it first

That is why we felt compelled to undertake the long and uncertain and costly labor of discovery and production.

We won the race of discovery against the Germans.

Having found the bomb, we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned the pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans.

We shall continue to use it until we completely destroy Japan’s power to make war. Only a Japanese surrender will stop us.