PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP AND THE ATOMIC BOMB

Brian McAllister Linn
Texas A&M University
End of the Depression/World War 2?

Beginning of the Cold War?
MAJOR SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

- Traditional or “Patriotic Orthodoxy”: Justified, saved lives
- Japanese: Unprovoked attack on civilians
- Critical: Unnecessary; Japan ready to surrender, US seeking to scare the USSR
- Current Consensus: Richard Frank, *Downfall*
HOW TO ORGANIZE THIS SECTION?

- Focus on Harry Truman and the process of making the decision to drop the atomic bomb
- Focus on the decision-making process that resulted in the dropping of the bomb
- Focus on the origin, development, and employment of the atomic bomb
- Focus on WW2 in the Pacific--with the atomic bomb being a but not the decisive reason for Japan’s surrender
FOCUS ON HARRY S TRUMAN

- President as ‘the decider’, buck stops here
- Easy to teach: multitude of sources; student identification with individual
It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. 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.

The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians. If Japan does not surrender, bombs will have to be dropped on her war industries and, unfortunately, thousands of civilian lives will be lost.

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 all 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.
DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

- Students get several different perspectives from primary sources, better training in critical thinking, weighing evidence, diagramming arguments.

- Allows for projects and discussion on morality vs. military considerations, how decisions are made in government.

- Good introduction for Cold War debate: Did US drop bomb to end WW2 or to begin WW3?
WHAT DID TRUMAN AND MILITARY PLANNERS KNOW?

- Japanese government/military not seeking peace. Were delaying negotiations with US and convinced ‘decisive battle’ in Japanese homeland would force better surrender terms

- Japanese did not expect USSR to attack (despite Potsdam declaration)

- Hiroshima bomb was not sufficient to force surrender, it was Nagasaki bomb and USSR attack that forced Emperor to intervene

- “it is fantasy, not history to believe that the end of the war was at hand before the use of the atomic bomb”
DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT OF ATOMIC BOMB

- Origins of Manhattan Process and technological problems that had to be overcome

- Broader context than just decision to drop bomb; students can follow the project from beginning to end

- Moral issues

- Broader range of views (not just military and policymakers)
ATOMIC BOMB IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STRATEGIC BOMBARDMENT OF JAPAN

- Presidential leadership and decision-making process are removed, military factors (technology, tactics) are emphasized.

- Use of atomic bomb is simply a further step in bombing campaign already destroying Japanese cities

- Teaching points: use of military force leads to escalation; president and decision makers become secondary to tactical and technological constraints; war is difficult to control
LUZON, 9 JANUARY-15 AUGUST 1945

- US casualties: 47,000 including 10,380 killed (93,422 non-battle casualties--mostly disease); Japanese casualties: 230,000

- Rape of Manila: est. 100,000 civilian casualties, horrific atrocities

- Japanese retreat to mountains, 50,000 troops under Yamashita continue to resist until end of war
“We have used [the atomic bomb] against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare”--Harry Truman, 9 August 1945
OKINAWA, 1 APRIL-2 JUNE

- US Casualties: 12,520 killed, 36,631 wounded
- Japanese Casualties: 110,071 military killed; 142,000 civilian casualties
- Japanese employ 40,000 civilians in combat support
- 3000 kamikaze missions inflict 10,000 US casualties
- Japanese continue to fight long after it is clear the battle is over, many incidents of suicide, atrocities, fake surrenders, etc.
AMERICAN VIEWS OF THE LESSONS OF LUZON-Okinawa?

- Japanese will never surrender, have embraced national suicide
- Japanese atrocities place them outside the laws of war and international relations--cannot be trusted
- Japanese tactics have improved to extent that invasion will result in catastrophic casualties
Invasion of Kyushu (October 1945)

- Estimated 600,000 defenders
- Extensive use of kamikaze
- Civilian paramilitaries
- 90,000-300,000 US casualties (very controversial)
- Japanese casualties at 1,000,000
DEMOCIDE IN ASIA

- Situation in Far East did not (apparently) effect US policymakers because not understood, not high priority---but Critics/Revisionist school (which is essentially counterfactual) tend to ignore the consequences of continued Japanese rule.

- Estimates of civilian casualties to to either direct killing or indirect (famine, forced labor) in Asia range from 5,000,000 to 30,000,000. Walter Gruhl argues for 20,365,000 including 12,340,000 in China; 3,000,000 in Indonesia,

- POW casualties under Japanese control were 330,000
STRATEGIC BOMBARDMENT OF JAPAN

- Matterhorn and early disappointments

- MG Curtis LeMay’s new Tactics: incendiaries (napalm), increase bomb loads, target population centers

- 9 March 1945 Tokyo Raid
  - 80,000-100,000 dead, 1 million homeless
Hiroshima, 6 August 1945

Nagasaki, 9 August 1945
Lesson on atomic bomb offers multiple teaching strategies--but need to identify learning objectives at beginning.

Focusing on presidential leadership (Truman) or on decision-making process provides ‘easiest’ means for incorporating primary sources, group projects, etc.

Revisionist/critical (bomb unnecessary) focus is counterfactual, not supported by new primary sources, of limited use in teaching critical thinking

Focus on development or employment of atomic bomb has potential but will require more digging (by teachers) to find and use primary sources