

Teaching Historical Thinking using Harry S. Truman's Press Release from 6 August 1945

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The United States's involvement in World War II poses history teachers with a paradox: students arrive in the classroom with a broader understanding of the chronology and major issues than just about any other topic in US history. Yet, this prior knowledge often hinders learning because many students assume that they already know the topic. US popular memory portrays World War II as a simple struggle of good versus evil. President Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki complicates that narrative, however. The past seven decades do not seem to have lessened the passions that began with the publication of John Hersey's 1946 *New Yorker* article, "Hiroshima."⁸⁰

Historians are taught to be wary of what James Axtell calls, "the blessed curse of hindsight."⁸¹ An historian would try to uncover Truman's historical context. They might question whether Truman's decision was motivated primarily by a desire to bring about the end of the war or whether other foreign policy concerns might have also influenced.

But those who have not had opportunities to study the discipline of history, do tend to ask anachronistic questions. This is a problem all teachers encounter, but I have found it particularly acute when studying the decision to drop the atomic bomb. Each semester, I generally find two groups of outspoken students. Some insist that Truman had no choice and that to question his decision is to question the validity of their understanding of the US mission. Others maintain that Truman's decision was a war crime and any investigation into the complexity and historical context of the decision excuses Truman's moral culpability.

To get around this impasse and to focus students on the historical context, I assign a speech Truman gave on 6 August 1945 shortly after the US dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. Truman sought to inform and create a narrative. He told the American public that the harnessing of atomic energy was a long-term and secret project that was an essential front in the larger war. His narrative highlighted the cooperation among scientists, the government, and industry. Truman's underlying message: the atomic bomb is a testament to the style of regulatory capitalism embodied in the New Deal.⁸²

I begin our discussion of Truman's speech by asking students to explain his major themes. Quickly they recognize what is left out, at least from our early twenty-first-century perspective. Truman did not explain to the American public why he decided to use an atomic weapon. Other than a few short concluding paragraphs where he speculated on the use of nuclear energy as an alternative to fossil fuels and called for a regulatory body to oversee

⁸⁰ Paul Boyer, "Exotic Resonances: Hiroshima in American Memory," in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, Michael J. Hogan, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 143-167. Michael J. Yavenditti, "John Hersey and the American Conscience: The Reception of *Hiroshima*," *Pacific Historical Review* Vol. 43 (February 1974): 24-49.

⁸¹ James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13.

⁸² Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, "Press release by the White House, August 6, 1945," Ayers Papers, Subject File. Army U.S., Press releases, the atomic bomb and atomic energy. http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistestop/study_collections/bomb/large/documents/index.php?documentdate=1945-08-06&documentid=59&pagenumber=1.

“the production and use of atomic power within the United States,” he did not seem to be aware of the potential consequences of a nuclear age. He did not say whether the US was preparing to invade the Japanese mainland. Nor did he claim that he used the bomb to save American lives.

I like to ask students why Truman did not address these topics that are so important to us today. Early in the discussion, students correctly point out that Truman was making a public statement. He was trying to shape the narrative. Why bring up the moral question when he didn't have to? After a bit of prodding, students also come to another important recognition: Truman did not know the major issues that would shape future debates on his decision. Whatever we might personally think about the morality of his decision, we cannot expect Truman to foresee the steady proliferation of atomic weapons, the real fear that the logic behind mutually assured destruction would falter, or what would happen in one of the nuclear-armed states failed.

Teaching Truman's August 6th speech has led me to realize that I am not innocent when it comes to anachronism. While understanding that Truman had no way of knowing the unintended consequences of dropping the bomb or of the extent of human misery it would create, I cannot help but wonder why he didn't put more effort into exploring other options. Why he didn't investigate the peace feelers that Japan had set the Potsdam summit in July? Why not continue to maintain current positions and wait for a surrender? Its hard to look at the multiple possibilities available to Truman and accept that the bomb or an all-out invasion of the Japanese mainland were his only two choices. When placed within the context of growing Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and Stalin's promise to enter the war against Japan in August, Truman's motives become more complex and sinister.⁸³

In asking these questions, I and other historians try to avoid anachronism by investigating what Truman knew in June, July, and August 1945. Yet, is it my (our) need to condemn rooted anachronistic concerns? Our knowledge of future events-the horrors of radiation poisoning, the complete devastation of two cities, the beginning of the Cold War, the arms race- forces me to privilege this decision over others. After all, the fire bombings of Dresden, Germany, and Tokyo were military attacks on civilian targets and both led to far more deaths than the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁸⁴ Yet those decisions have received less popular and scholarly attention. We tend to scrutinize Truman's decision to use nuclear weapons far more because we know the long-term consequences.

Maybe some degree of anachronism is inevitable (or perhaps necessary). But what I love about teaching Truman's speech is that a close reading of it can distract us from our presentist instincts. It reminds us that our moral considerations are a product of our current historical moment.

⁸³ J. Samuel Walker, “The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update,” in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, 11-39.

⁸⁴ Tami Davis Biddle, “Dresden 1945: Reality, History, and Memory” *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 72 (April 2008): 413-449. And Mark Clapson, “The Conventional and Atomic Bombing of Japan” in *The Blitz Companion: Aerial Warfare, Civilians and the City since 1911* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2019): 97-118.