

## What Should President Truman Do?

### Overview

Students will explore the various options for ending the war with Japan by simulating a meeting of President Truman's advisory committee. Students will also evaluate Truman's decision to drop two atomic bombs on Japan. This activity is adapted from the lesson by the Constitutional Rights Foundation ([http://www.crf-usa.org/bria/bria15\\_3.html#atomic](http://www.crf-usa.org/bria/bria15_3.html#atomic)).

### Grade

11

### Course

US History

### North Carolina Standard Course of Study for US History

- Objective10.01: Elaborate on the causes of World War II and reasons for United States entry into the war.
- Objective10.02: Identify military, political, and diplomatic turning points of the war and determine their significance to the outcome and aftermath of the conflict.

### Essential Questions

- Why did President Truman choose to use atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki?
- What other options could America have chosen in ending the war with Japan?

### Materials

- *Choices: Truman, Hirohito, and the Atomic Bomb*, article attached and available at [http://www.crf-usa.org/bria/bria15\\_3.html#atomic](http://www.crf-usa.org/bria/bria15_3.html#atomic)
- Truman's Interim Committee roles, attached

### Duration

60 minutes

### Preparation

Students should have a basic knowledge of World War II events.

### Procedure

#### Choices to End the War

1. As a warm-up, project the attached image of the atomic bomb explosion. Allow students to view the image silently then ask:
  - What do you think this image that you are looking at is?
  - Which one country has used an atomic bomb/nuclear weapon on another country? (America)
  - When and why did America use an atomic bomb? (Encourage students to share what they already know about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or WWII in general.)
2. Tell students that they will be exploring the US government's decision to drop two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945 in today's lesson. Hand out the attached article, *Choices: Truman, Hirohito, and the Atomic Bomb* and instruct students to read it individually or in partners. Once students finish, discuss:
  - How many Japanese died from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? How many Americans were projected to be killed if Americans invaded Japan rather than dropping the bomb?
  - What was the Manhattan Project?
  - What was the purpose of the Interim Committee? Why do you think they gave Truman the advice they gave?
  - The article states that "No real debate ever took place among top U.S. military and civilian leaders on whether to drop..." the atomic bomb. Why do you think this is?
  - In the proclamation sent to Japan by the Allies, "unconditional surrender" was demanded. Yet, the threat of the atomic bomb or the entry of the Soviet Union into the war was not mentioned. Why do you think these points were left out? Do you agree or disagree with the decision to leave this information out?
  - Why were Hiroshima and Nagasaki chosen as detonation sites?

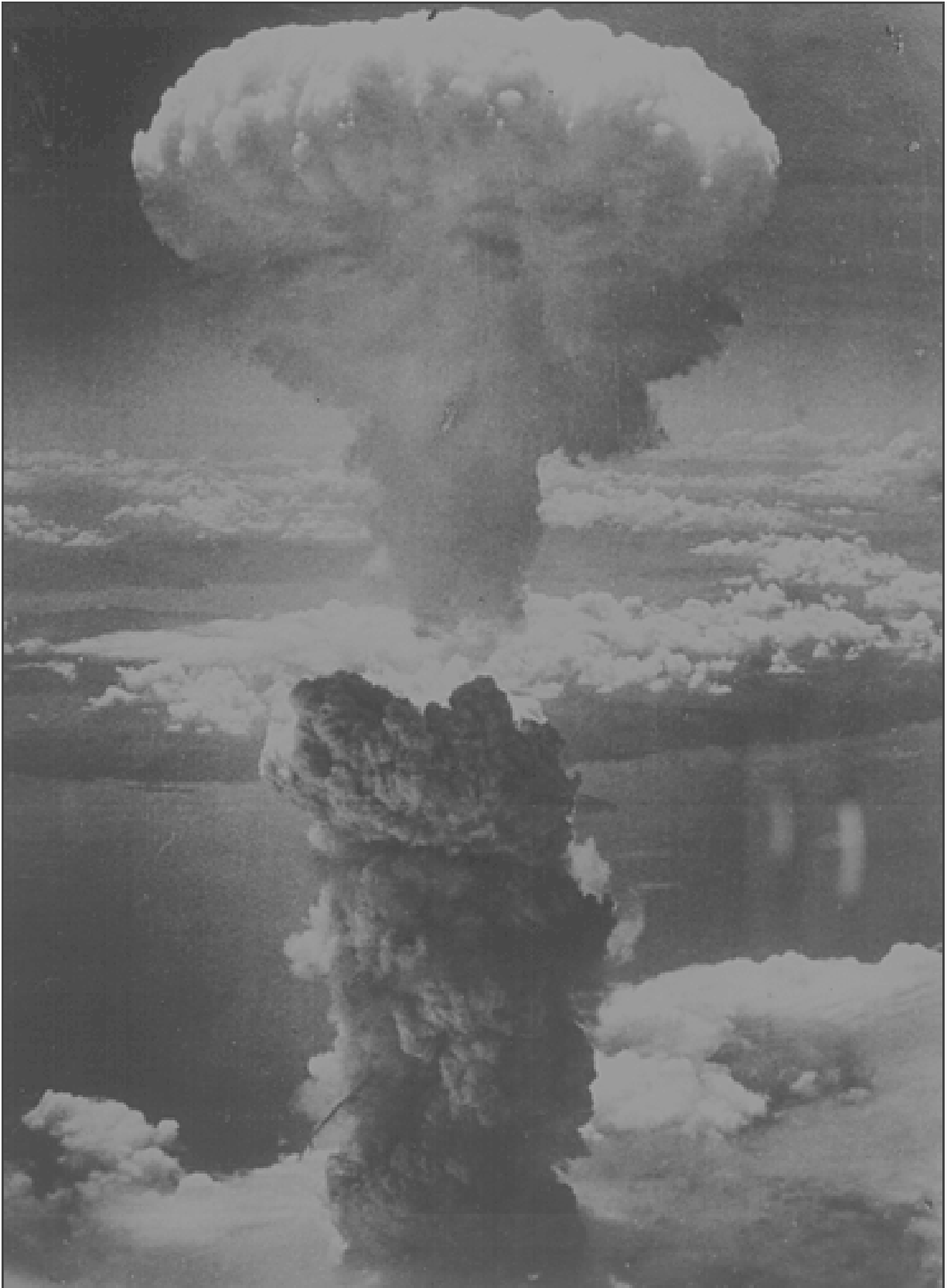
- Describe the situation in Japan before the atomic bomb was dropped. Why do you think the Japanese did not initially surrender?
- What role did Emperor Hirohito play in the final surrender of Japan?
- Why do you think President Truman ordered the use of atomic bombs against Japan?
- Some have argued that there really was very little difference in the use of atomic bombs and conventional bombs against Japan. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

### **Simulation: What Should Truman Do?**

- Place students into groups of 7 (if you have an uneven amount of students a group can be less than seven by eliminating one of the roles). Tell students that they will participate in an activity in which they each play members of President Truman's committee of advisers, Vice President Barkley, or President Truman himself. At this meeting, committee members will be charged with advising the President on what they think the best option for ending the war with Japan will be. Hand out the roles and give students a few moments to read them. Then, give the following instructions:
  - Those playing members of the **committee of advisers** will receive a role which explains an option you believe President Truman should choose for ending the war with Japan. You will have 10 minutes to prepare for the advisory meeting with the President and Vice President. Individually, brainstorm ways you can convince the Vice President and President to see things your way. Once you receive your role, do not share it with anyone else in your group until the meeting begins. After your planning time, President Truman will call the meeting to order. At this point, each of you may express your idea for ending the war with Japan. Afterwards, others may question you or challenge your idea, so be prepared to defend the option you are presenting and convince President Truman to see things your way. Open debate may occur, but anyone being disrespectful (yelling, interrupting, etc.) will be reprimanded by the President. Once Truman has heard enough, he will end the advisory portion of the meeting. At this point Truman and Vice President Barkley will discuss what America should do based on your suggestions. Note that you can only listen during this portion of the meeting. You can not offer any additional comments.
  - Those of you playing **President Truman** will be responsible for facilitating this meeting according to the instructions provided in the role given to you. You will call the meeting to order once the teacher says that planning time is up, and you and your Vice President will hear from each adviser. You should feel free to ask questions and confer with your Vice President throughout the process. Allow committee members to ask questions of one another, support one another, and/or challenge one another. The Vice President is at this meeting to assist you in making your decision, to take notes for you, and to help you manage any issues that may arise. Once you have heard from all committee members and the debate has fizzled out, you can thank the advisers for their time and end the meeting. You will discuss the options with your Vice President. While the advisers can listen, they cannot offer any comments during this time. You must make your final decision at this point. The Vice President can advise you on his opinion, but ultimately the decision is yours.
  - Those of you playing **Vice President Barkley** are responsible for assisting the President in facilitating this meeting. Take detailed notes on each of the five options you hear about and be prepared to assist the President in making his final decision.
- Allow students to ask questions then tell them to take 10 minutes to prepare for the meeting. Remind advisors to refer back to the article or any other classroom resources to find any statements that may back up their option. Also remind students that others in their groups will have opposing views and that they should be prepared to address the opposition.
- Once students are prepared, instruct all students playing President Truman to call their meetings to order. As groups meet, circulate around the classroom only interrupting if a group is off task or needs assistance with the process. The completion time for the group meetings will vary based on the students participating, but it is recommended to allow for at least 30 minutes. Teachers should monitor which stage of the process each group is in. Once Truman has made a final decision in 1-2 groups, announce that other groups need to have a decision made within 5-10 minutes. If any group is unable to finish the process, or Truman is unable to reach a decision, this can be debriefed in the closing discussion.
- Call the meetings to a close and have the class give themselves a hand. Then, ask each President Truman to explain the decision that was made to the class and why that decision was made. Allow other members of the group to express their opinion regarding the option that was chosen. Further discuss:
  - Advisors, were any of you arguing for an option that you do not believe in? Explain.
  - Vice Presidents, did you agree with the decision the President Truman in your group made? Why or why not?
  - For those of you playing President Truman, was it hard to make a decision? Why or why not?

- Was this meeting difficult? Explain. How do political leaders handle situations when there are many different opinions?
7. Go through each of the options that advisors represented and allow students to discuss their opinions of whether or not this was the appropriate action for America to take:
- **Continue the invasion and wear down the Japanese** (Scholars critical of this approach point out that strategic bombing may have taken some time to force a surrender putting American pilots, troops and sailors at risk. In addition, many more Japanese civilians may have died using this option than were killed in the two atomic raids.)
  - **Demonstrate the atomic bomb** (It has been argued that the U.S. had only two atomic bombs ready for use and two more in development. The technology was brand new and delivering the bombs was very difficult. A failure of the demonstration might have actually encouraged Japanese resistance and in any case would have given them a chance to take countermeasures. Atomic bombs also present an incredible expense to create.)
  - **Wait for the Russians to join the war** (Scholars critical of this approach say it is not clear what Japan might have done in response to a declaration of war by the Soviets. Japanese forces in Asia were already stranded and largely abandoned. It would have taken Soviet forces some time to threaten mainland Japan, and the Japanese already faced overwhelming force from the Americans. Some scholars believe that the United States still would have been faced with an invasion of Japan and the Soviets would have had more time to bring more of Asia under Communist domination.)
  - **Negotiate peace with Japan and make it clear they can keep the emperor** (Official allied policy was for unconditional surrender for Japan, just as it had been for the Nazi regime. Some scholars question whether arranging negotiations might not have strengthened the war faction of the Japanese government by showing weakness on the part of the allies. They also might have encouraged greater demands on the part of the Japanese, including preservation of the military, and given them more time to prepare for invasion. It has also been pointed out that the Japanese agreed to surrender only after the bomb was dropped and doubt that the concession about the emperor by itself would have led to immediate surrender.)
  - **Dropping the atomic bomb** (In the end, Truman concluded that none of these choices would have ended the war as quickly as an atomic attack. At the time, Truman was under tremendous pressure from the American public to end the long, horrible war against a hated enemy as fast as possible and "bring the boys home." Few of the thousands of American troops being transferred from Europe to prepare for Japan's invasion criticized Truman's decision. For many, it saved their lives. However, the devastation of Japan, the suffering endured, and the thousands of lives lost was vast.)
8. Either as a culminating discussion or as a homework writing response, ask students to respond to:
- In your opinion, did Truman make the right decision in dropping the atomic bombs on Japan? Why or why not?

## The Atomic Bomb



## Choices: Truman, Hirohito, and the Atomic Bomb

by the Constitutional Rights Foundation, [http://www.crf-usa.org/bria/bria15\\_3.html](http://www.crf-usa.org/bria/bria15_3.html)

*In summer 1945, **President Truman** focused on two choices to end the war with Japan: invade or use the atomic bomb. His decision created a controversy that is with us today. Truman ordered the **atomic bomb** dropped on two Japanese cities. On August 6, 1945, a single American B-29 bomber, the **Enola Gay**, dropped one atomic bomb on **Hiroshima, Japan**. About 70,000 persons, some military but mostly civilian, perished in the blast and the firestorm that resulted from it. Another 50,000 died later from injuries and radiation sickness. Three days after Hiroshima, some 60,000 Japanese died when a plane dropped a second bomb on **Nagasaki**.*

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Shortly after Hitler began World War II in Europe, physicists Leo Szilard and Albert Einstein wrote a letter to **President Roosevelt**. They urged him to set up a project to develop an **atomic bomb**, which they believed Germany was already working on. Roosevelt initiated the "**Manhattan Project**" in 1941. From the very beginning, almost everyone involved in this project believed that America would use the atomic bomb to end the war. When Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, Vice President **Harry S. Truman** became president. Unfortunately, Roosevelt had never included his vice president in discussions about the atomic bomb. Two weeks after becoming president, he was finally fully briefed about the bomb.

Though Germany unconditionally surrendered on May 7, 1945, the war in the Pacific continued. Seeking advice, Truman authorized a group of civilian leaders and scientists to make recommendations on the atomic bomb's use. This so-called **Interim Committee** decided to reaffirm the long-held policy of using the atomic bomb when it was ready.

The Interim Committee also recommended against giving the Japanese any warning or demonstrating the bomb on some uninhabited area. Committee members wanted to assure a total surprise to shock the Japanese government and people into quickly surrendering. The committee agreed that the "most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses." The Interim Committee additionally concluded that using the atomic bomb to end the war would make the **Soviet Union** "more manageable" in the postwar world.

After being briefed on the Interim Committee's recommendations, Truman met with his top **military advisors** on June 11. Truman wanted to know the number of expected **casualties** (dead, wounded, and missing). The casualty estimates for the projected invasion varied greatly and became the subject of much controversy after the war. The Army-Navy estimate for the invasion was about 200,000 American casualties, which would have included 50,000 killed.

Dreading the idea of an invasion of Japan, Truman traveled to Potsdam, Germany, to meet with the other Allied leaders in mid-July 1945 (the **Potsdam Conference**). Truman was anxious to get **Joseph Stalin**, the leader of the Soviet Union, to enter the war against Japan. Stalin had previously promised to do this after Germany's defeat even though he had signed a **non-aggression treaty** with Japan early in the war.

During the conference, the Americans received a message stating that a bomb had been successfully tested in New Mexico. Truman's attitude brightened, and he no longer seemed so intent on pressuring the Russians to declare war on Japan. While still at Potsdam, Truman authorized the military to use atomic bombs "when ready but not sooner than August 2." Two atomic bombs were available, and two more were nearing completion. The war planners had selected four target cities including **Hiroshima** and **Nagasaki**. Neither city contained major military or industrial installations. They chose them mainly because conventional bombing had already leveled other major cities.

No real debate ever took place among top U.S. military and civilian leaders on whether to drop on Japan what Truman described in his diary as "the most terrible bomb in the history of the world." Only a small group of scientists involved in the Manhattan Project opposed dropping it. They circulated a petition warning of a nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union after the war if America used atomic bombs against Japan. Ironically, the scientist that led this petition effort, Leo Szilard, had also written the letter with Einstein asking Roosevelt to build the bomb.

At the end of the Potsdam Conference on July 26, the Allies at war with Japan issued a **proclamation**. They demanded the "**unconditional surrender**" of the Japanese armed forces. This meant that the Allies would not consider negotiating peace terms. The declaration also called for the Japanese people to form a new government, which put the future of the Japanese **emperor** in doubt. It did not mention the atomic bomb or the pending entry of the Soviet Union into the war. But the declaration warned that if Japan did not immediately surrender unconditionally, it would face "prompt and utter destruction."

Japan's leaders knew nothing about the atomic bomb and little about other U.S. war plans. But Truman and his advisers knew something about what the Japanese leaders were saying and doing. American intelligence had broken Japan's secret code. By summer 1945, Japan was a nation on the edge of defeat. Its navy hardly existed. Its best airplane pilots had been killed. Its large armies lay scattered and isolated throughout Asia. The American naval blockade of Japan had stopped most shipping, which created major shortages of food and oil. Continuing American bombing raids had leveled most major Japanese cities, killing 200,000 persons.

Still, Japan fought on. From April to June 1944 during the U.S. invasion of **Okinawa**, an island 400 miles from the Japanese homeland, Japanese forces waged a fierce and desperate battle. Inspired by **warrior traditions**, the soldiers held on for weeks preferring to die in suicide charges or by their own hand than to surrender. The navy launched waves of suicide airplane attacks on the U.S. ships supporting the invasion. Even many Japanese civilians living on the island killed themselves to avoid capture by the Americans. In finally conquering the island, U.S. forces suffered 48,000 casualties.

In spite of the loss of Okinawa and overwhelming U.S. military superiority, the Japanese government was deadlocked about what to do. On the one hand, **Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki** took office in April 1945 with the goal of ending the hopeless war effort. Suzuki, his foreign minister, and others in the government attempted to get the Soviet Union to act as a go-between in negotiating conditions of surrender to end the war with the United States, Britain, and China. Suzuki was not aware that Stalin had already decided to declare war on Japan in a few months.

Other members of the Japanese government and military leadership strongly opposed surrendering. They argued that Japan should accept "the honorable death of a hundred million" rather than give up. They moved ahead with plans for defending the homeland including the use of 350,000 troops, preparing thousands of pilots and planes for kamikaze attacks and mobilization of hundreds of thousands of civilians, including women, as home defense fighters. They hoped that these measures could repel an American invasion and force the United States to end the war on terms more beneficial to Japan.

Considered a sacred figure in Japanese society, **Emperor Hirohito** normally remained above government politics. Throughout most of the war, Hirohito never openly opposed any decisions made by Japan's leaders. For instance, Hirohito was present when the decision was made to attack Pearl Harbor, but he remained silent. By early 1945, however, Hirohito had concluded that there should be "a swift termination of the war." When Okinawa fell to the Americans in June, he sent a personal representative to Moscow seeking terms of peace from the Allies.

By August, time had run out for the divided Japanese government and Emperor Hirohito. On **August 6**, the **Enola Gay** dropped the first atomic bomb on **Hiroshima**. The political and military leaders still could not agree what to do. Hirohito, now speaking more forcefully than ever before, declared, "We must bow to the inevitable."

On **August 9**, disaster struck from two directions. The Soviet Union declared war on Japan, and the United States dropped the second atomic bomb on **Nagasaki**. The government remained paralyzed. The leaders could agree on only one thing: The emperor's position in Japanese society must remain at all cost.

Finally, Prime Minister Suzuki took the unheard-of step of calling upon the emperor himself to break the deadlock between those favoring surrender and those who wanted to fight on. After listening to both sides, Hirohito said that "continuing the war can only mean destruction for the nation." He then declared that Japan must accept surrender.

On August 10, Suzuki sent a notice of surrender to the Allies with the condition that the emperor would remain as the "sovereign ruler" of Japan. The Allies accepted on one condition. The emperor must yield authority to the supreme commander of the forces occupying Japan until a new government was established "by the truly expressed will of the people." Some Japanese leaders wanted to reject this requirement. But Hirohito announced that he agreed to the Allied terms. All top civilian and military leaders then pledged to obey the emperor's wishes. The war was over.

The war was over, but the debate over how it ended had just begun. In the years that followed, President Truman steadfastly defended his decision to use the atomic bombs. He argued that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced the Japanese to surrender quickly, thus avoiding an invasion that would have cost the lives of thousands of Americans. "I'd do it again," Truman often said.

## Committee Meeting Roles

### Advisor #1

You believe that America should **continue the conventional bombings and blockade** in Japan. You must convince Truman that by relying on the relentless and devastating B-29 firebombing raids on Japan's cities combined with the naval blockade, Japanese resistance will wear down. Thus, they will surrender without the devastating blow of the atomic bombs being dropped.

Spend the next 10 minutes preparing an argument that will convince Truman to view things your way. What information did you learn from the article that you can use to support your idea? What inferences can you make that will show the validity of your advice?

Also, you know that some of your fellow committee members think continuing the fight with Japan through invasion is a mistake. Consider what their alternate ideas may be, and be prepared to contradict them in a respectful way. You must convince President Truman to give the invasion more time and not use the atomic bomb.



### Advisor #2

You think that America should **demonstrate the atomic bomb**, showing Japan an example of what it can do. You must convince Truman that by demonstrating the atomic bomb, Japanese leaders, including Hirohito, will see that their nation will face total destruction if they do not surrender immediately. In your mind, this seems like the most logical next step, and you must convince Truman to take this step before thousands upon thousands of lives are lost.

Spend the next 10 minutes preparing an argument that will convince Truman to view things your way. What information did you learn from the article that you can use to support your idea? What inferences can you make that will show the validity of your advice?

Also, you know that some of your fellow committee members will disagree with you. Consider what their alternate ideas may be, and be prepared to contradict them in a respectful way. You must convince President Truman to demonstrate the atomic bomb so that actually using it on human beings can be avoided.



### Advisor #3

You think that America should **wait for the Russians to join the war**. If Truman waits a few more weeks for the Russians to declare war on Japan, you feel they will most likely surrender. You must convince Truman that the threat of invasion and occupation by both the Americans and Russians will have an even more shocking effect on the Japanese leadership than the atomic bombings.

Spend the next 10 minutes preparing an argument that will convince Truman to view things your way. What information did you learn from the article that you can use to support your idea? What inferences can you make that will show the validity of your advice?

Also, you know that some of your fellow committee members will disagree with you. Consider what their alternate ideas may be, and be prepared to contradict them in a respectful way. You must convince President Truman to wait for the Russians to join the war, which will most likely lead to Japan's surrender.



### Advisor #4

You think that America should **negotiate peace** with Japan. Remind Truman that Suzuki and Hirohito are trying to find a way to negotiate an end to the war already. You must convince Truman that if he discusses peace terms with them the war could end with less devastation and loss of life. Remind him of the thousands of innocent people that will die if the atomic bombs are dropped, and encourage him to consider how the rest of the world may view America for taking such inhumane action. As part of the peace negotiation, you think that America should also assure Japan that they can **keep the emperor**. Explain to Truman that the Japanese leaders will be more likely to surrender if the Allies assure them that we will neither abolish the position of the emperor nor try Hirohito as a war criminal. Refusing to consider anything but "unconditional surrender" is unrealistic.

Spend the next 10 minutes preparing an argument that will convince Truman to view things your way. What information did you learn from the article that you can use to support your idea? What inferences can you make that will show the validity of your advice?

Also, you know that some of your fellow committee members do not believe in the prospect of peace with Japan. Consider what their alternate ideas may be, and be prepared to contradict them in a respectful way. You must convince President Truman to negotiate peace for the good of your country and the world.



## Advisor #5

You think that America should **use the atomic bomb**. If America continues fighting in Japan, there will be an even greater loss of life of Allied soldiers, as well as of the Japanese. It is obvious that Japan will never surrender, and waiting for any such occurrence will only prolong this bad situation. Not to mention, dropping this bomb will show the entire world what strength and power America has.

Spend the next 10 minutes preparing an argument that will convince Truman to view things your way. What information did you learn from the article that you can use to support your idea? What inferences can you make that will show the validity of your advice?

Also, you know that your fellow committee members do not agree with using the atomic weapons. Consider what their alternate ideas may be, and be prepared to contradict them in a respectful way. You must convince President Truman to drop the atomic bomb for the good of your country.



**You are President Truman.** In a moment, you and your Vice President will be hearing from a committee of advisors regarding how you should end the war with Japan. Listen to each committee member and what they advise you to do. Weigh the pros and cons of each option. Feel free to ask questions and confer with your Vice President throughout the process. Once all of the advisers have made their case and you have asked all the questions you wish to ask, thank them for their time and discuss with your Vice President which options you are interested in considering. The Vice President may have different opinions than you. While you should listen to him and take what he says into consideration, the ultimate decision is yours to make.

### Spend the next 10 minutes preparing for the meeting you are leading:

1. Prepare a 1 minute blurb to begin the meeting that you are facilitating. In this blurb, you should welcome the committee of advisors and summarize the purpose of the meeting in your own words. You should also explain how the meeting will be structured. (Tell committee members that you will hear from each one of them to express their opinion on the situation. After they have made their case, you, the Vice President, and other committee members are free to question them.)
2. As the President, it is your responsibility to manage the professionalism of your committee during this meeting. Everyone should listen to one another and remain respectful at all times. While it is perfectly naturally to disagree, committee members should not yell at one another or interrupt one another. Your Vice President is here to help you manage any issues that arise. Let the committee know these ground rules when you open the meeting.
3. After all committee members have expressed their opinions and everyone has asked all of the questions they wish to ask, thank the committee members for their time and end the meeting. You and your Vice President will then have an open deliberation regarding what choice America should make to end the war with Japan. Committee members may not address anyone at this point. They may only listen. Take your Vice President's opinion into consideration, but remember that ultimately the decision is yours.
4. You must make a decision by the end of this meeting.



**You are Vice President Alben Barkley.** In a moment, you and President Truman will be hearing from a committee of advisors regarding how America should end the war with Japan. As each advisor presents, take detailed notes on what they are recommending. Feel free to ask questions and weigh the pros and cons of each option as they are presented. Once all of the advisers have made their case the President will close the meeting and confer with you on which options he is interested in. While you should express your opinions to help him decide, the ultimate decision is his.

### Spend the next 10 minutes preparing for the meeting you are leading:

1. The President will open the meeting and allow each advisor to present their ideas. After each presentation, other members of the meeting may ask questions and challenge the ideas. As the Vice President, make sure you assist the President in maintaining order at this meeting. (While it is perfectly naturally to disagree, committee members should not yell at once another or interrupt one another.) Assist the President as needed in managing any issues that arise.
2. Spend some time reviewing the article and inferring what you think some of the options that you will here today may be. Do you have any opinions already on how you think the war should be ended? Remember, you will be responsible for helping the President make his final decision.
3. After all committee members have expressed their opinions and everyone has asked all of the questions they wish to ask, the President will end the meeting. The two of you will then have an open deliberation regarding what choice America should make to end the war with Japan. Committee members may not address anyone at this point. They may only listen. If anyone besides you or the President tries to speak, remind them they are only allowed to listen during the deliberation.
4. The President must make a decision by the end of this meeting. It is your responsibility to help him, but understand the final decision is his.

