A Wartime Decision

Weigh the evidence behind the decision to use atomic weapons

9-12.US2.19 "Evaluate the factors that influenced the decision to employ atomic weapons against Japan."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Circle three factors U.S. leaders could weigh, underline evidence favoring the use of atomic weapons, and number two details that support considering another course.

The Decision in Summer 1945

1. In July 1945, American leaders faced a war that had continued despite Germany's surrender. Japanese forces had fought fiercely on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, where American losses were heavy and many Japanese soldiers and civilians died. U.S. planners were preparing an invasion of Japan's home islands, beginning in November. Leaders feared an invasion could cause enormous casualties, though estimates varied and no one knew the likely toll. The United States was also bombing Japanese cities and restricting supplies by sea. Those methods had inflicted immense suffering but had not yet produced surrender. Each additional month of war put more lives at risk.

2. The first successful test of an atomic bomb took place on July 16. At Potsdam, the United States, Britain, and China called on Japan to surrender or face "prompt and utter destruction." Their declaration did not explicitly promise that Japan's emperor could remain on the throne, an issue important to Japanese leaders. Some U.S. officials believed a clearer promise about the emperor might help end the war. Others doubted Japan would surrender without a severe shock. President Harry Truman and his advisers could not know whether a changed surrender offer, continued bombing and blockade, or Soviet entry into the war would end the fighting soon.

3. The United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6 and another on Nagasaki on August 9. The Soviet Union declared war on Japan on August 8 and attacked Japanese forces in Manchuria. Japan announced its surrender on August 15. Historians debate how much weight to give the bombs, the Soviet attack, and Japan's concerns about its emperor in explaining that decision. They also debate whether U.S. leaders viewed the bombs partly as a way to limit Soviet influence after the war. These disputes matter because explaining why a choice was made is different from judging whether that choice was necessary or justified.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the fighting on Iwo Jima and Okinawa strengthen the case for using atomic weapons instead of invading? What limits that argument?

2. How could the emperor's status affect the choice between another surrender offer and an atomic attack? Weigh both possibilities.

3. Why might continued bombing and restrictions on supplies by sea have seemed less attractive than using a new weapon? Use two details from the passage.

4. How does the timing of Soviet entry into the war complicate the claim that atomic bombs alone caused Japan's surrender?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you advise Truman in late July 1945. In one paragraph, recommend using an atomic weapon or trying one alternative first; support your choice with at least two passage details, weigh a serious drawback, and state what remains uncertain.

ANSWER KEY

A Wartime Decision

HIGH SCHOOL · 9-12.US2.19

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Circle three factors U.S. leaders could weigh, underline evidence favoring the use of atomic weapons, and number two details that support considering another course. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the fighting on Iwo Jima and Okinawa strengthen the case for using atomic weapons instead of invading? What limits that argument?	**The heavy losses suggested an invasion could cost many lives, but estimates varied and its actual toll was unknown.**
2	How could the emperor's status affect the choice between another surrender offer and an atomic attack? Weigh both possibilities.	**A promise about the emperor might have encouraged surrender, but some officials doubted Japan would surrender without a severe shock.**
3	Why might continued bombing and restrictions on supplies by sea have seemed less attractive than using a new weapon? Use two details from the passage.	**Those methods had already caused immense suffering without producing surrender, and each additional month of war put more lives at risk.**
4	How does the timing of Soviet entry into the war complicate the claim that atomic bombs alone caused Japan's surrender?	**The Soviet Union attacked Japanese forces between the two atomic bombings, before Japan announced surrender, so its attack may also have influenced the decision.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would recommend clarifying that Japan could keep its emperor before using an atomic bomb. The Potsdam declaration did not explicitly offer that assurance, and some U.S. officials thought it might help secure surrender. This approach could spare civilians from an atomic attack. Yet Japan had not surrendered despite city bombing and restrictions on supplies by sea, so a revised offer might fail and prolong the war. No one could know in late July whether that promise would end the fighting quickly.

Accept either recommendation in Part 3 if it uses two accurate passage details, considers a serious drawback, and acknowledges uncertainty. Do not require students to claim that any single factor caused Japan's surrender.