The Atomic Choice

Weigh the reasons for a wartime decision and its lasting effects

USH.C.5.2.D "Analyze President Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb and describe the legacy of the development and use of atomic weapons."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two reasons given for using the bombs, circle two alternatives, and number two long-term effects. Use your marks to compare the decision's possible benefits with its costs.

A Decision That Outlasted the War

1 In July 1945, President Harry Truman learned that the United States had tested an atomic bomb. The war in Europe had ended, but Japan had not surrendered. American forces had suffered heavy losses in battles such as Okinawa, and plans for an invasion raised fears of more deaths on both sides. Truman and his advisers also demanded Japan's unconditional surrender. On August 6, a U.S. bomber dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. On August 9, another struck Nagasaki. The bombs destroyed large areas and killed many civilians. Japan announced its surrender on August 15, after the bombings and the Soviet Union's entry into the war against Japan.

2 Supporters of Truman's decision argued that using the bombs could force a quick surrender and avoid a costly invasion. Some leaders also hoped to end the war before Soviet forces gained more influence in Asia. Critics argued that Japan was already weakened by bombing and blockade, and that changing surrender terms or waiting for Soviet entry might have ended the war without atomic attacks. Others proposed demonstrating the bomb away from a city. No one can know exactly how these alternatives would have changed Japan's decision. Estimates of deaths in a possible invasion varied widely, so the choices cannot be judged by a single certain casualty count.

3 The consequences continued long after Japan surrendered. Survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki faced burns, radiation sickness, and increased cancer risks. Nuclear weapons later became far more powerful, and the United States and Soviet Union built huge arsenals. Each side feared attack, yet each believed its weapons might discourage the other from striking first. This uneasy balance, called nuclear deterrence, did not remove the risk of accident or war. Arms control treaties sought to limit weapons, while the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty aimed to prevent their spread. The decision leaves a question: how should leaders weigh lives they hope to save against lives their weapons take?

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did the planned invasion make using the bombs seem preferable to supporters, and what cost did that reasoning have to weigh?

2. Choose two alternatives critics raised. How might each have changed the choice Truman faced?

3. Why can the passage not establish that the bombs alone caused Japan's surrender?

4. How does the passage show both a possible security benefit and a continuing danger in the legacy of nuclear weapons?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a five-sentence museum label evaluating Truman's choice. Include a reason for using the bombs, an alternative, an immediate human cost, and two distinct long-term effects; end with a judgment that acknowledges uncertainty.

ANSWER KEY

The Atomic Choice

HIGH SCHOOL · USH.C.5.2.D

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two reasons given for using the bombs, circle two alternatives, and number two long-term effects. Use your marks to compare the decision's possible benefits with its costs. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did the planned invasion make using the bombs seem preferable to supporters, and what cost did that reasoning have to weigh?	**Supporters hoped the bombs would bring a quick surrender and avoid deaths in an invasion. That possibility had to be weighed against the civilians killed by the bombs.**
2	Choose two alternatives critics raised. How might each have changed the choice Truman faced?	**Changing surrender terms might have led Japan to surrender without atomic attacks. Waiting for Soviet entry might also have led to surrender without the bombs.**
3	Why can the passage not establish that the bombs alone caused Japan's surrender?	**Japan announced its surrender after both bombings and the Soviet Union's entry into the war, so the passage cannot separate their effects.**
4	How does the passage show both a possible security benefit and a continuing danger in the legacy of nuclear weapons?	**Nuclear weapons might discourage an enemy from striking first, but deterrence does not remove the risk of accident or war.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Truman's advisers feared that invading Japan would kill many people, so a rapid surrender seemed urgent. Critics argued that waiting for Soviet entry might have ended the war without atomic attacks. The bombs killed civilians and left survivors with radiation sickness and increased cancer risks. Later, nuclear arsenals created deterrence but also risks of accident and war, while arms control treaties sought to limit those weapons. I think leaders should have explored alternatives more fully, although no one can know whether waiting would have brought surrender before further deaths.

Accept different evidence-based judgments about the decision. Responses should distinguish documented consequences from uncertain claims about what an alternative would have achieved.