

The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

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50 years after the bomb was dropped on Japan in World War II, historian Stephen Ambrose explains that Americans were prepared to do anything to win World War II.

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Transcript

The Decision To Drop The Atomic Bomb

BRYANT GUMBEL:

Half a century has passed since the United States dropped the bomb on Japan, but today the decision to do so remains as controversial as ever. Americans in 1995 are divided on the issue, but back in 1945 they were unified in their desire to win the war at any price.

From the moment the Japanese initiated their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Americans were committed to winning the war. Their faith in their country and their cause never wavered. On Pacific fronts like Midway, Guadalcanal, and Iwo Jima, Americans fought a tenacious enemy who was trained to never surrender.

Mr. STEPHEN AMBROSE (Historian): They just simply were under orders that you fight until you die. You fight until you don't have any bullets left, and then you use your bayonet. And if you're too weak to use your bayonet, then you use your teeth. And before you allow yourself to be captured, you take your last hand grenade and hold it to your chest and pull the pin on it. And they did.

GUMBEL: May, 1945, the war ends in Europe. Following Franklin Roosevelt's death in April, President Harry Truman learns for the first time about the program to build the atom bomb.

July 16, 1945, Alamogordo, New Mexico. After years of painstaking research, the world's first atomic bomb is successfully detonated at dawn. Light from the blast is visible 250 miles away. Truman hears the news on his way to Pottsdam for a summit with his wartime allies.

Mr. AMBROSE: He got a message saying that the baby was born alive and kicking. It was a code for 'the test had been successful at Alamogordo.' And his reaction, well, it was exaltation. 'Thank God, we've got a weapon now that will end the war without our having to invade.'

GUMBEL: July 26th, the Allies release a statement warning Japan that it will face prompt and utter destruction if it does not surrender immediately. On the same day, material for the atomic bomb arrives at Tinian Island in the Pacific where the 509th squadron is relocated, preparation for its mission.

Lieutenant Colonel PAUL TIBBETS (Commander, 509th Composite Group): President Truman said go.

And we got that word on the afternoon of the fifth and that started the wheels turning.

GUMBEL: August 5th, 10 p.m., the crew is briefed on the weather and makes a final check of their aircraft. Three planes will make the journey, including the Enola Gay, which will carry the bomb.

Maj. SWEENEY: In--in order to meet target time, which was approximately 8 a.m. Japanese time, we taxied out for a 2:45 a.m. take-off. The most beautiful sunrise I ever saw was that morning, a great big red ball of fire coming out of the ocean to the east.

GUMBEL: 3:10 a.m., aboard the Enola Gay, weaponeer Deke Parsons connects the detonator in the 9,700 pound uranium bomb nicknamed "Little Boy." 6:30 a.m., Colonel Tibbets reveals to his crew the content of the bomb they are carrying.

Lt. Col. TIBBETS: I made an announcement off a communications system that said, 'We're on the--we're flying the first atomic bomb to be used in warfare.'

GUMBEL: 7:25 a.m., Enola Gay begins to climb to 31,600 feet, the altitude at which the bomb will be dropped. A weather reconnaissance plane radios the words "Advice: Bomb Primary," meaning the target will be the city of Hiroshima.

Dr. FRANCIS TOMOSAWA (Hiroshima A-Bomb Survivor): It was a bright, summer day, and very peaceful, quiet too in the morning.

GUMBEL: 8:09 a.m., Enola Gay begins its bomb run. It's target: a T-shaped bridge located in the heart of Hiroshima. Six minutes later, the bay doors of the plane were opened.

Ms. MIYOKO MATSUBARA (Hiroshima A-Bomb Survivor): I was standing next to my friend and I saw a bomber in the sky. It looked like the bomber was heading right for me so I immediately laid down on the ground.

Maj. SWEENEY: I did have an instant thought that, for better or for worse, if it works or if it doesn't work, it's too late now, because there are no strings on it to pull it back in.

Dr. TOMOSAWA: It was so bright that my friends were standing right next to me, front, side, left and right, I couldn't see them.

GUMBEL: For those at the center of the explosion there was not time to even see the blinding flash or feel the heat. All that was left was a shadow where they once stood. Thousands of others were hurled through the air and burned, some beyond recognition.

Ms. MATSUBARA: I was blown off the ground by the blast. When I checked my body I realized that my face, arms, and legs were seriously burned. My skin was peeling off and I could see my flesh underneath.

GUMBEL: The intense heat created fires that consumed at least four square miles of the city. A mushroom shaped cloud hung over Hiroshima producing highly radioactive black rain. Those who survived the initial explosion were poisoned by the radiation. They lost their hair, vomited blood, and grew ever weaker until they too expired.

Dr. TOMOSAWA: And I looked for the river bank, and at that time it was kind of a low tide. And I saw hundreds of people lined up alongside the river bank on both sides, and they were all dead.

GUMBEL: The death toll was staggering. Eighty thousand people were killed in the first few days, another 60,000 died from their injuries by the end of the year. Three days later at 11:02 a.m., a second atomic bomb, this one made of plutonium, was dropped on Nagasaki. Hideko Yoshiyama worked at this

factory. She was 19 at the time.

Ms. HIDEKO YOSHIYAMA (Nagasaki A-Bomb Survivor): Broken glass from the windows stuck in all of my body and face. I was bleeding everywhere. As I struggled to get outside of the building I heard my colleagues asking for help. They cried out, 'Help! Help!' realizing I was alive, but I didn't help them.

GUMBEL: Another 70,000 people perished in Nagasaki, and, like Hiroshima, the city was completely devastated. Japan surrendered on August 14th and Americans were understandably euphoric over the victory. They had no idea the extent of the nuclear horror they had inflicted. Although opinion is now divided over the use of the bomb, the majority of veterans continue to defend what happened.

Maj. SWEENEY: We saved by not having an invasion, nobody really knows, but tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, maybe a million casualties on each side.

Mr. ROBERT LIFTON (Author "Hiroshima In America"): There's always been a deep uneasiness on the part of the ordinary American people about Hiroshima and Nagasaki because it's hard to feel it to be consistent with our sense of being a decent people.

GUMBEL: Scientists believed nothing would grow in Hiroshima or Nagasaki for at least 75 years; but time has proven them wrong. Today there are reminders everywhere of the tragedy Americans inflicted. In Hiroshima, visitors seek out the A-bomb dome that stands near ground zero, the only relic left from that fateful day. And in the peace park is the official memorial monument, a stone chest containing over 180,000 names of those who died from the A-bomb. More names are added every year. Radiation no longer exists in the city, but its effects are still being felt.

Mr. TAKASHI HIRAOKA (Mayor of Hiroshima): Those who experienced the bomb never know when radiation sickness will reappear in their household, and they have great fears about the genetic effects. So the damage caused by the atomic bomb is immeasurable in some ways.

GUMBEL: Survivors now range in age from 49 to 95, and they are eager to tell their stories. At the Honkawa Elementary School, located in the heart of Hiroshima, only one student out of 400 survived the blast. Today children at that same school are taught early on about the bomb.

Unidentified Woman #1: After hearing the story of the atomic bomb, whenever I see an airplane flying in the sky during summer I am scared and think it may be an American bomber.

GUMBEL: The people of Hiroshima have devoted themselves to ridding the world of nuclear weapons. Fifty years after their city was devastated, they are awaiting the day when they can extinguish the flame of peace, which they say will burn until all nuclear weapons disappear from the face of the earth.

A couple of footnotes: Since Hiroshima, American taxpayers by one count, have spent what amounts to about \$3 1/2 trillion on nuclear weapons. The better news is that our government has not built a single nuclear weapon in five years, and in that time, our nuclear arsenal has shrunk by a third.