

# Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb

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Truman's Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb President Truman, acting as Commander in Chief in 1945, had thrust upon him one of the most difficult moral decisions in the history of humankind. While many argue the morality of the decision, there can be no doubt about its impact on the culture of the American military. Truman's conversations about the bomb were not about society's expectations, but rather on the post conventional thought that dealt with "... the effects of the use of the bomb, not [...] whether it ought to be used". 1 The decision to use atomic bombs against Japan was influenced by several factors that are relevant to Kohlberg's stage 5 on the moral development scale.

There were discussions on several occasions about the need to warn the Japanese civilians on an impending attack. While on the surface this seems morally admirable, it was considered a vain action and may have imperiled millions of civilians and military personnel. 2 By June 1 1945, the industrial infrastructure had been decimated, but Japan showed no signs of surrendering. 3 The unwillingness of Japan to reach a military surrender prompted the Truman administration to pursue the plan of using the bomb. Though it would ultimately be Truman's decision, he carefully considered the other options and weighed the opinions of his closest advisors.

The Truman administration had little trust in Russia's long-term intentions in regards to the Asian continent. There were millions of American and Japanese lives at stake. Truman's decision would involve all these stakeholders in a Kohlberg stage five thinking that recognized "... national self-interest itself must be limited and compromised". 4 Truman had reached a moral decision based on the interests of the world at large, and the stakeholders involved.

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Truman has been criticized for acting in his own political interests. However, there was a plan on the table to warn Japan, but this plan was discarded due to the real possibility of the bomb being a dud<sup>5</sup>. The speculation that he was trying to out maneuver the Soviet invasion may have some foundation. This may have been a plan to begin a policy of containment that the coming Cold War would demand. During cabinet discussions, there was never any talk about Truman's political aspirations. The decision was made based on Truman's moral judgment about what would be in the best interest of all the parties involved.

To place Truman's decision in the category of Kohlberg's level 6 Universal Moral Principle would necessitate that Truman exhibit, "... concepts of ethical thought [...] that enables them [to] think outside the accepted values of the society in which they find themselves...".<sup>6</sup> A leader in the time of war has a basic ethic to save lives. This sometimes contradicts the need to take lives. Another avenue may not have spared any more lives than the option Truman took and as Morton states, " Whether any other set of circumstances would have resolved the crisis [...] is a question history cannot yet answer".<sup>7</sup> Truman made a moral decision in a post-conventional process that did not consider his own political future, but rather his consideration of the lives of several societies and the future of the global community.