

Teaching American History Project  
A Debate: Should The United States Have Used the Atomic  
Bombs Against Japan In Order To End WWII?

By: Karen Diaz

**Grade:** 9-12

**Length of Period:** 1 class period

**Inquiry:** Students will be asked to analyze several documents concerning the decision to drop the two atomic bombs to end WWII. Students will need to organize the information into two categories. Category One: This information supports the decision to use the bomb to end WWII (Pro). Category Two: This information does not support the decision to use the bomb to end WWII (Con). We will practice this in class first using one of the documents from the packet. They will do two for homework which we will review the following day as well as look at the final document

Students will be answering the essential questions:

- What considerations were discussed that led to the ultimate use of the bombs?
- Should the US have used the atomic bombs to end WWII? Explain

**Objectives:**

Students will know and be able to:

- Recognize the credentials of the author of a source to consider its effectiveness
- Determine if information is helpful or hurtful to a particular point of view
- Understanding bias

**Materials:**

- Graphic organizer Pro Con Chart
- <http://www.dannen.com/decision/45-07-03.html>
- <http://www.dannen.com/decision/hst-jl25.html>
- <http://www.dannen.com/decision/scipanel.html>

**Activities:**

- Handout Sources: the graphic organizer as well as the packet of documents
- Using the first document the Szilard Petition, first Version, July 3, 1945 student volunteers will take turns reading the first three paragraphs out loud in class.
- After each paragraph we will as a class discuss whether the information contained in the paragraph could be included in either the pro or con column.
- I will generate a pro con chart on the board using the students' feedback.
- After we have completed three paragraphs in class I will ask students to partner with a classmate and continue to finish reading the document and discussing what information should be in each column
- After about ten to fifteen minutes I will ask volunteer groups to add their pro and con decisions to the chart on the board. Which we can then discuss

- Students will then be asked to share their analysis of the justifications and to note how sometimes the same quote could appear on the pro and con side. (This invariable happens.)
- This is a great opportunity to discuss point of view, and the assumptions we carry without even realizing it. (For Example: to paraphrase one point in this document ‘this powerful new weapon is in the hands of the Army’) Some students see this as a good thing, some a bad thing, then we talk about how Szilard and the scientists who signed the petition obviously thought about it.
- After the class has discussed points assign the next two primary source documents for homework: “President Truman’s Diary Entry July 25, 1945” and “Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Weapons June 16, 1945” Students should read the documents and continue adding to their pro con organizer
- Exit slip question: How did this Szilard document help develop your opinion regarding the debate topic?

**Assessment:**

- Informal assessment comes from observation of students participating in the class discussion and reading and then in pairs as they analyze the written document and fill out the graphic organizer.
- Participation in partner and full group discussion
- Individual questions and comments from students
- The graphic organizer will be collected at the end of the lesson for a formal assessment
- This is to prepare for an in class debate: Should the US have used the atomic bombs to end WWII?
- This will be followed up with an essay in which they answer the same question.

**CT State Standards:**

- Cite evidence from a source to determine as author’s purpose and intended audience
- Compose a thesis statement using primary and secondary sources
- Ask relevant questions related to social studies/history to initiate, extend or debate a point of view during a discussion
- Use evidence to form an interpretation of a historical event
- Evaluate primary and secondary interpretations of a historical event

Debate Note Sheet Name \_\_\_\_\_

Topic: Should the US have dropped the atomic bombs on Japan in order to end WWII?

<u>Pro</u>	<u>Con</u>

### Szilard Petition, First Version, July 3, 1945

Source: U.S. National Archives, Record Group 77, Records of the Chief of Engineers, Manhattan Engineer District, Harrison-Bundy File, folder #76.

The first version of Leo Szilard's petition, dated July 3, 1945, was more strongly worded than the final version. It was also more specific in identifying the moral issues that he believed were involved.

Rejecting the pretense that the targets would be *military*, the petition called atomic bombs "a means for the ruthless annihilation of cities."

The bombing of cities, it continued, "had been condemned by American public opinion only a few years ago when applied by the Germans to the cities of England. Our use of atomic bombs in this war would carry the world a long way further on this path of ruthlessness."

The petition concluded by requesting the President "to rule that the United States shall not, in the present phase of the war, resort to the use of atomic bombs."

The July 3 version received 59 signatures at the Chicago Metallurgical Laboratory, but it was not submitted to the President in this form. Szilard sought to broaden support, and rewrote it into the final version of July 17.

---

**SECRET**

THIS PAGE REGRADED UNCLASSIFIED

Order Sec Army

720564

July 3, 1945

#### **A PETITION TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES**

Discoveries of which the people of the United States are not aware may affect the welfare of this nation in the near future. The liberation of atomic power which has been achieved places atomic bombs in the hands of the Army. It places in your hands, as Commander-in-Chief, the fateful decision whether or not to sanction the use of such bombs in the present phase of the war against Japan. We, the undersigned scientists, have been working in the field of atomic power for a number of years. Until recently we have had to reckon with the possibility that the United States might be attacked by atomic bombs during this war and that her only defense might lie in a counterattack by the same means. Today with this danger averted we feel impelled to say what follows:

The war has to be brought speedily to a successful conclusion and the destruction of Japanese cities by means of atomic bombs may very well be an effective method of warfare. We feel, however, that such an attack on Japan could not be justified in the present circumstances. We believe that the United States ought not to resort to the use of atomic bombs in the present phase of the war, at least not unless the terms which will be imposed upon Japan after the war are publicly announced and subsequently Japan is given an opportunity to surrender.

If such public announcement gave assurance to the Japanese that they could look forward to a life devoted to peaceful pursuits in their homeland and if Japan still refused to surrender, our nation would then be faced with a situation which might require a re-examination of her position with respect to the use of atomic bombs in the war.

Atomic bombs are primarily a means for the ruthless annihilation of cities. Once they were introduced as an instrument of war it would be difficult to resist for long the temptation of putting them to such use.

The last few years show a marked tendency toward increasing ruthlessness. At present our Air Forces, striking at the Japanese cities, are using the same methods of warfare which were condemned by American public opinion only a few years ago when applied by the Germans to the cities of England. Our use of atomic bombs in this war would carry the world a long way further on this path of ruthlessness.

Atomic power will provide the nations with new means of destruction. The atomic bombs at our disposal represent only the first step in this direction and there is almost no limit to the destructive power which will become available in the course of this development. Thus a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.

In view of the foregoing, we, the undersigned, respectfully petition that you exercise your power as Commander-in-Chief to rule that the United States shall not, in the present phase of the war, resort to the use of atomic bombs.

**Leo Szilard and 58 co-signers**

[Source for number of signers of July 3 petition: Szilard to Frank Oppenheimer, July 23, 1945, Robert Oppenheimer Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.]

---

**Copyright Notice:** The original of this document is believed to be in the public domain. Its transcription and formatting as an e-text, however, is copyright 1995-1998 by Gene Dannen ([gene@dannen.com](mailto:gene@dannen.com)).

Harry S. Truman, Diary, July 25, 1945

---

President Truman told his diary on July 25, 1945, that he had ordered the bomb used.

Emphasis has been added to highlight Truman's apparent belief that he had ordered the bomb dropped on a "purely military" target, so that "military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children."

---

We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark.

Anyway we "think" we have found the way to cause a disintegration of the atom. An experiment in the New Mexico desert was startling - to put it mildly. Thirteen pounds of the explosive caused the complete disintegration of a steel tower 60 feet high, created a crater 6 feet deep and 1,200 feet in diameter, knocked over a steel tower 1/2 mile away and knocked men down 10,000 yards away. The explosion was visible for more than 200 miles and audible for 40 miles and more. This weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10th. **I have told the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children.** Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop that terrible bomb on the old capital or the new.

He and I are in accord. **The target will be a purely military one** and we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives. I'm sure they will not do that, but we will have given them the chance. It is certainly a good thing for the world that Hitler's crowd or Stalin's did not discover this atomic bomb. It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful...

Truman quoted in Robert H. Ferrell, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) pp. 55-56. Truman's writings are in the public domain.

**Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Weapons, June 16, 1945**

---

**Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Weapons, by the Scientific Panel of the Interim Committee on Nuclear Power, June 16, 1945.**

**Source:** U. S. National Archives, Record Group 77, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Manhattan Engineer District, Harrison-Bundy File, Folder #76.

---

**TOP SECRET**

**THIS PAGE REGRADED UNCLASSIFIED**

**Order Sec Army By TAG per  
720564**

**THIS DOCUMENT CONSISTS OF 2 PAGE(S)**

**NO. 1 OF 12 COPIES, SERIES A**

**RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE IMMEDIATE USE OF NUCLEAR  
WEAPONS**

A. H. Compton  
E. O. Lawrence  
J. R. Oppenheimer  
E. Fermi

[signature]  
J. R. Oppenheimer  
For the Panel

June 16, 1945

You have asked us to comment on the initial use of the new weapon. This use, in our opinion, should be such as to promote a satisfactory adjustment of our international relations. At the same time, we recognize our obligation to our nation to use the weapons to help save American lives in the Japanese war.

(1) To accomplish these ends we recommend that before the weapons are used not only Britain, but also Russia, France, and China be advised that we have

made considerable progress in our work on atomic weapons, that these may be ready to use during the present war, and that we would welcome suggestions as to how we can cooperate in making this development contribute to improved international relations.

(2) The opinions of our scientific colleagues on the initial use of these weapons are not unanimous: they range from the proposal of a purely technical demonstration to that of the military application best designed to induce surrender. Those who advocate a purely technical demonstration would wish to outlaw the use of atomic weapons, and have feared that if we use the weapons now our position in future negotiations will be prejudiced. Others emphasize the opportunity of saving American lives by immediate military use, and believe that such use will improve the international prospects, in that they are more concerned with the prevention of war than with the elimination of this specific weapon. We find ourselves closer to these latter views; we can propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use.

(3) With regard to these general aspects of the use of atomic energy, it is clear that we, as scientific men, have no proprietary rights. It is true that we are among the few citizens who have had occasion to give thoughtful consideration to these problems during the past few years. We have, however, no claim to special competence in solving the political, social, and military problems which are presented by the advent of atomic power.

---

**Copyright Notice:** The original of this document is believed to be in the public domain. Its transcription and formatting as an e-text, however, is copyright 1995-1998 by Gene Dannen (gene@dannen.com).