

THE POTSDAM DECLARATION (JULY 26, 1945)

Introduction

The dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki remains among the most controversial events in modern history. Historians have actively debated whether the bombings were necessary, what effect they had on bringing the war in the Pacific to an expeditious end, and what other options were available to the United States. These very same questions were also contentious at the time, as American policymakers struggled with how to use a phenomenally powerful new technology and what the long-term impact of atomic weaponry might be, not just on the Japanese, but on domestic politics, America's international relations, and the budding Cold War with the Soviet Union. In retrospect, it is clear that the reasons for dropping the atomic bombs on Japan, just like the later impact of nuclear technology on world politics, were complex and intertwined with a variety of issues that went far beyond the simple goal of bringing World War II to a rapid close.

The Potsdam Declaration was issued on July 26, 1945 by U.S. President Harry Truman, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and President Chiang Kai-shek of the Republic of China, who were meeting in Potsdam, Germany to consider war strategy and post-war policy. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin also attended the Potsdam Conference but did not sign the Declaration, since the Soviet Union did not enter the war against Japan until August 8, 1945.

Document Excerpts with Questions

From *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, by Robert J.C. Butow (Stanford University Press, 1954). © 1954 Stanford University Press.

The Potsdam Declaration (July 26, 1945)

Proclamation Defining the Terms for the Japanese Surrender, July 26, 1945

- (1) WE — THE PRESIDENT of the United States, the President of the National Government of the Republic of China, and the Prime Minister of Great Britain, representing the hundreds of millions of our countrymen, have conferred and agree that Japan shall be given an opportunity to end this war.
- (2) The prodigious land, sea and air forces of the United States, the British Empire and of China, many times reinforced by their armies and air fleets from the west, are poised to strike the final blows upon Japan. This military power is sustained and inspired by the determination of all the Allied Nations to prosecute the war against Japan until she ceases to resist.
- (3) The result of the futile and senseless German resistance to the might of the aroused free peoples of the world stands forth in awful clarity as an example to the people of Japan. The might that now converges on Japan is immeasurably greater than that which, when applied to the resisting Nazis, necessarily laid waste to the lands, the industry, and the

method of life of the whole German people. The full application of our military power backed by our resolve, will mean the inevitable and complete destruction of the Japanese armed forces and just as inevitably the utter devastation of the Japanese homeland.

- (5) Following are our terms. We will not deviate from them. There are no alternatives. We shall brook no delay.
- (6) There must be eliminated for all time the authority and influence of those who have deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest, for we insist that a new order of peace, security and justice will be impossible until irresponsible militarism is driven from the world.
- (7) Until such a new order is established and until there is convincing proof that Japan's war-making power is destroyed, points in Japanese territory to be designated by the Allies shall be occupied to secure the achievement of the basic objectives we are here setting forth.
- (10) We do not intend that the Japanese shall be enslaved as a race or destroyed as a nation, but stern justice shall be meted out to all war criminals, including those who have visited cruelties upon our prisoners. The Japanese Government shall remove all obstacles to the revival and strengthening of democratic tendencies among the Japanese people. Freedom of speech, of religion, and of thought, as well as respect for the fundamental human rights shall be established.
- (12) The occupying forces of the Allies shall be withdrawn from Japan as soon as these objectives have been accomplished and there has been established in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people a peacefully inclined and responsible government.
- (13) We call upon the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.

Questions:

1. Why did the United States and its allies issue this declaration? Do you think they expected Japan to comply?
2. Why do you think the declaration called for "unconditional surrender"? Do you think the war might have ended sooner, and without the use of the atomic bombs, if the United States had been willing to negotiate a peace with Japan? Why did America not pursue that course?
3. Does this declaration suggest that the occupation of Japan will be punitive or constructive? According to the declaration, who bears responsibility for leading Japan down the path to war?
4. How would you have responded to this document as a leader in the Japanese government? As an "average" Japanese person at the time?