

## Lesson Plan...The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

I feel that one of the most pivotal decisions made during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the decision to drop the atomic bomb. The repercussions of this decision has had far reaching consequences that have shaped and changed the course of events far outside the borders of the United States. This singular decision resulted in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, the arms race to build bigger and more powerful weapons of mass destruction, the space race, Cuban Missile Crisis, nuclear proliferation, the Nuclear Commission, and the SALT agreements just to mention a few. The connection between this decision and future events that unfolded around the globe and between various nations has lead to a race for emerging nations to acquire nuclear capabilities. The lesson plan that follows focuses on the decision to drop the atomic bomb on civilian populations of major metropolitan centers and it asks a simple question “*Was the decision to drop the bomb justified?*”

### Objectives and Massachusetts Frameworks

There are several objectives for this particular lesson. The first is to understand the reasons behind the development to create an atomic bomb in the United States and to have the students realize that both the Japanese and the Germans had atomic bomb programs. The second objective is to have them begin to understand and analyze the debates about its use from a variety of perspectives. The third and last objective is the hardest of all...and that is having the students grapple with the morality behind using such a powerful and destructive weapon.

This lesson is tied to the *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks* through **USII.16** “Explain the reasons for the dropping the atom bombs of Japan and their short and long-term effects.” The *Study Strands and Learning Standards* are **History #1-3** (Chronology and Cause; Historical Understanding; Research, Evidence and Point-of-view) and Civics/Government #16 (Authority, Responsibility and Power). The *Concepts and Skills* are numbers 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

## **Day 1...War in the Pacific Theater of Operations**

The lesson opens with a discussion on the war in the Pacific theater of operation and how Allies began to stem the Japanese advances in the Pacific. By 1942 the Allies take the offensive and began to retake Japanese held islands. I lead the discussion toward the Allied strategy of island hopping which moved the Allies closer and closer to the Islands of Japan, as well as, the staggering human costs of waging this type of war against an enemy who would fight to the death and last man for their country and emperor. This moves us into the sections of “*The Battle for Okinawa*” and “*The Atomic Bomb Ends the War.*” Prior to discussion a simple show of hands is taken to see who thinks the decision to drop the bomb was justified to end the WWII. At this point about 95% of the class raises their hands in agreement.

These two sections in our textbook begin to lay the basic framework for the DBQ (day 4) and the Socratic Seminar (day 5). The text begins to present the students with some of the perspectives about the decision to drop the bomb...from Winston Churchill, J. Robert Oppenheimer, President Harry S. Truman, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Emperor Hirohito, and Secretary of War Henry Stimson...just to mention a few. The atomic bomb section ends with a “*Point/Counterpoint*” critical thinking section and it poses two questions to help students connect with history. The first question focuses the main agreements for and against dropping the atomic bomb and the second question concerns whether or not the United States was justified in using the atomic bomb against the Japanese. These two questions set the students up nicely for day two.

## **Day 2...WWII Reader & Perspectives Activity & Truman’s Speech**

The students use a variety of books and articles, both in class and as homework assignments over the next several days, to help them begin to understand the many opinions and perspectives about the decision to use the bomb to end this global war. On this day they can chose to work independently or within a small group. Most all students chose to work within a cooperative group.

All of the assignments, both pre- and post-reading, are designed to motivate the student to think about the following...

- the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1945
- to brainstorm reasons to explain why the bomb was used
- to contemplate the ethical problems that often surrounds the use of a new weapon or military technology
- to draw upon the evidence from all the resource materials for both pro and con
- identify possible alternatives that President Truman could have used against the Japanese
- how the dropping of the bomb affected the postwar relations between the United States and the Soviet Union

One of the primary resources used is Perspectives: Readings on American History in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by Daniel J. Boorstin and Brooks Mather Kelley Editors, pages 61-81. This resource has a handout of questions that will aid them in beginning to think about the points listed above. Another resource is the WWII Reader published by Nextext of McDougal Littell, Inc. It has interviews with two Japanese survivors of Hiroshima, Yamaguchi and Hirata. These accounts are very detailed and paint a very vivid picture. They have access to my copy of, The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb by Gar Alperovitz. I have earmarked pages that might give them further insight and information about the reasons and events that lead to the use of the atomic bomb.

Some of the articles given to them are: President Truman's statement on the use of the atomic bomb on Japan as delivered in a radio address sixteen hours after the bomb was dropped on August 6, 1945; a descriptive report by New York Times reporter William L. Laurence on the bombing of Nagasaki; and a bomb timeline for 1945.

I plan to include the article we received on April 15<sup>th</sup> about the decision to drop the bomb (labeled as Chapter 13, pages 310-338), as well as parts from David M. Kennedy's book, Freedom from Fear, pages 835-851. At the end of this class they receive a copy of a practice DBQ on the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that was developed by the Thandi Center. This DBQ was found on line and is a fairly balanced mix of perspectives, both Japanese and

American, and also include photographic images for the students to study and assess. (*Note: Some of the supporting documents are attached for your convenience.*)

### **Day 3...*Hiroshima, the Decision to Drop the Bomb* Video**

On day three the students watch the decision to drop the bomb unfold in living color through the use of original film footage, oral histories and commentaries of men and women from all walks of life who were affected by the decision or who played a role in the development of the atom bomb to those who contributed to the decision to use the atomic bomb. This documentary presents both the Japanese, Soviet and American perspectives. Their assignment for this video is to take notes as many different perspectives as possible. All of the perspectives presented give different reasons for either supporting or denouncing the decision.

### **Day 4...DBQ on the Decision to Drop the Bomb**

On day four the students hopefully come in prepared to conquer their data-based question: *Was the United States justified in using the atomic bomb to end World War II?* Within their seven paragraph essay they must discuss and analyze five different perspectives on the use of the atomic bomb to end the war, as well as to evaluate the moral implications of the decision. They are allowed to use all of the resources they have been given or have developed in class. The essay must be turned in at the end of class. By this point only about 50% of the students believe the decision was justified.

### **Day 5...Socratic Seminar...Was the decision justified?**

The final day of the lesson plan allows the students to voice what they have learned about the justification and the morality of the use of the atomic bomb in a seminar setting. The desks are arranged in a circle formation allowing the students a direct line of vision with each other. I select one of the students to act as moderator and he/she poses the question and the Socratic Seminar begins. I normally stand to the side and let the students engage each other in this critical thinking

exercise and they normally do a fantastic job of building off each other's comments and moving the discussion/debate right along with minimal intervention from me or the moderator. This part of the seminar conversation must be based on the perspectives and information that was available in the 1940s and the students must use what they have learned to support their opinions. There is a list of core questions that I give the moderator that will allow him/her to keep the conversation moving or to expand the conversation in other directions.

The Socratic Seminar ends with the students being allowed to voice their personal opinions about the decision to drop the atomic bomb. The moderator then hands out the short story titled *The Weapon* by Fredric Brown. The moderator reads the story out loud to the class. At the end of the story, a question appears at the end of the story...*"What message about our technology is the writer trying to express in this story?"* The last item on the moderators list is to ask his/her peers to compare the decision made then to drop the bomb with current events that are happening around the world and difficult decisions that are being made by people in positions of power.

### **Rubrics and Assessments**

Only two of the assignments are collected, the DBQ and the seven-paragraph essay. The rubric I use is very simple as I look only for four things:

- did they follow formatting instructions
- does each of the five perspectives clearly state the writers position and provide supporting facts
- draw a conclusion that is supported by valid reasons
- show an understanding of the moral implication as well as the costs and benefits of the action taken

The best assessment comes from the students themselves when I ask them to write a self-reflection piece about what they have learned from the critical thinking exercise and what grade would they give themselves if they were the teacher. I can honestly say that 99% of my students give themselves a grade that matches up with my assessment of their endeavors and understanding of the issue of using the atomic bomb.