
Were the Atomic Bombings Necessary?

Videos:

“Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings: Were Nuclear Weapons Required to End the War?”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gltrQGcLcAU> (6:59 minutes)

“Hiroshima: Was the atomic bomb necessary? - UpFront”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=584k0gwvhUs> (2:33 minutes)

Guide:

The questions below will help students achieve a better understanding of the arguments made on either side of a contentious topic. Because these questions often touch upon statements made briefly in the videos, we recommend reading the questions before watching each video.

Students are encouraged to take notes during the videos, and it may be helpful for students to break into groups, each taking responsibility for only a few questions, before coming together for discussion.

Analysis Questions:

1. What are the opposing ideas in these two videos?
2. According to the Imperial War Museums video, what was “Operation Downfall”?
3. The Al Jazeera video showed a list of U.S. military and political leaders who did not support the atomic bombings at the time that they happened. Did you know the bombings were so polarizing even within the U.S. government? How does that affect your view of the decision to bomb Japan?
4. According to the Imperial War Museums video, what were the two major concerns the Allies had about Operation Downfall?
5. Al Jazeera quoted Chief of Staff William Leahy as saying that the U.S. had “adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the dark ages.” What did he mean by this?
6. In the Imperial War Museums video, Stephen Walton said: “So, with what seemed like providential timing, the successful testing of the world’s first atomic bomb...offered just such a solution.” What did he mean by “providential timing”?
7. In the Al Jazeera video, Mehdi Hasan said that a postwar panel of 1,000 experts concluded that Japan would have surrendered regardless of the atomic bombings. If this is true, why does anyone still argue that the bombings were necessary?
8. The Imperial War Museums video said that the atomic bombings ushered in the era of mutually assured destruction. What does “mutually assured destruction” mean?

9. Mehdi Hasan said there's compelling evidence that it was the entry of another army into the Pacific conflict that pressured Japan to surrender, not the atomic bombings. What army was this?
10. The Imperial War Museums video ends by asking: "Were there any other potential alternatives [to the atomic bombings]?" Did the video itself give you the impression that there were any alternatives?
11. Mehdi Hasan said: "[Apologizing is] not really something most U.S. presidents are fond of doing." What did he mean by this?
12. If the atomic bombings *were* justifiable, what compels people to argue against them?
13. If the atomic bombings were *not* justifiable, what compels people to attempt to justify them?
14. During World War II, conventional bombs killed far more people than the atomic bombs. Why do you think more significance is placed on the atomic bombings? Are atomic bombings categorically different from conventional bombings? Why/Why not?
15. Should one of the arguments we heard carry more weight than the other? If so, which one? Why?
16. Did these two videos share any common ground? Were there any points on which they agreed? If so, what were they?
17. Did you have an opinion on this topic before watching these videos? If so, what was it? Has your opinion changed? If so, how? What did you learn from these videos that affects your views on this topic?
18. What else would you like to learn about this topic?