



# Bringing an End to War: Paul Tibbets and the Decision to Drop the Atom Bomb

## Handout A: Narrative

### BACKGROUND

By 1945, the Second World War had been dragging on for six long years. The United States had entered in December of 1941 after the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Since mid-1942, the United States had been executing a slow and bloody campaign against the Japanese Imperial forces. Following a strategy known as “Island Hopping,” American troops moved inexorably closer to the Japanese “Home Islands.” As they went, they set up airfields and support bases that helped them expand further and further into the Pacific. The closer the Americans got to shores of Japan, the more fierce and costly the conflicts became. Two of the bloodiest battles were on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the first of the Japanese “Home Islands.” Both were fought in 1945, collectively costing nearly 20,000 lives. Planners feared that the eventual invasion of Japan would be even more costly.

While the American forces advanced slowly across the Pacific, U.S. scientists were busy working on a secret weapon, the atomic bomb. The United States hoped the atomic bomb would be so powerful that it would force the Japanese to the negotiating table. The weapon was finally tested in early 1945. All that was left was to use this new deadly tool in the war zone. That mission fell to Paul Tibbets.

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He understood what he was being asked to accomplish. He also understood that one day, the pages of history might question his actions. However, on the morning of August 6, 1945, when the *Enola Gay* strained to get off the ground as a result of the 10,000-pound atom bomb that made the B-29 dangerously close to the airplane’s cargo capacity, Colonel Paul Tibbets was not worrying about how history would judge him. One thing in his mind was far more important than his reputation—ending World War II. Over the past six years, the world had been embroiled in war. Millions of soldiers and civilians had lost their lives. Germany had surrendered in May, bringing an end to combat operations in the European Theater. Now, only the Empire of Japan stood between the world and peace.

Many believed that invading and taking the Japanese home islands would be the only way to knock Japan out of the war. However, in Paul Tibbets’ cargo bay, there hung a new experimental weapon that had the possibility of making an invasion unnecessary. In his mind, whatever unprecedented horror and damage awaited the people of Hiroshima would be far less than the uncertainty and unpredictability of America launching a military invasion upon Japan. Tibbets was willing to risk his reputation for a quick end to the war.

The open waters of the seas south of Japan were a stark contrast to the cornfields of Iowa where

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Tibbets grew up. What was no different, however, was the open air that Tibbets navigated his airplane, the *Enola Gay*, through as he headed north to Hiroshima.

Flying in an airplane had been Tibbets' first love, something that captivated his heart the moment he jumped in a cockpit. His first flying experience was at age twelve when he had joined barnstormer Doug Davis at the Hialeah Race Track in Florida and thrown candy bars down to an excited crowd below. The year was 1927, the same year Babe Ruth would smack an unfathomable sixty home runs for the New York Yankees and "Lucky" Lindbergh would make all of America proud by becoming the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic. It was a restless, exciting decade for America, one that quickly faded from memory when the Great Depression struck in 1929. The economic challenges of the 1930s were followed by the horrors of World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Tibbets' passion for flying brought him into the military a few years before the attack upon Pearl Harbor. He enlisted enthusiastically in the army in 1937. By 1938, he had become a pilot in the Army Air Corps, the predecessor to the U.S. Air Force. When the United States joined World War II in 1941, Tibbets was sent to Europe, where he flew 43 bombing missions. His aeronautical skills attracted attention, and he eventually found himself back in the states testing a new weapon that America hoped to introduce into the war, a massive new bomber labeled the B-29, nicknamed the "Superfortress."

While Tibbets was test flying the B-29, other Americans were busy trying to develop another new weapon—the atomic bomb. Codenamed the Manhattan Project, the atom bomb had yet to be successfully built or tested by the time of Germany's surrender in May 1945.

The atom bomb became a reality in July 1945 when a group of American scientists and military personnel gathered in the remote deserts of New Mexico to observe a successful detonation of an atom bomb. President Harry Truman had a choice to make. Either he could launch a Normandy-like invasion of the well-guarded Japanese mainland, or he could use the atom bomb in hopes that the Japanese would realize there was no defense against its unprecedented destructive forces.

After less than six months on the job as president, Truman made his choice. The Japanese had rejected an ultimatum that gave them the chance to surrender, and Truman decided to drop the atom bomb on two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The military brass decided that the best pilot to be given the responsibility to lead the first mission was Tibbets.

In the early hours of August 6, 1945, roughly 2,000 miles southeast of Japan, the crew of the *Enola Gay* departed from Tinian in the Mariana Islands and headed toward history. At 8:16 a.m., as the crew looked down upon the city of Hiroshima, the *Enola Gay* dropped its fateful cargo. Forty-five seconds later, the weapon, nicknamed "Little Boy," exploded with a force of over 12,000 tons of TNT. Instantly, 70,000 people died, and the heart of the city set ablaze. Three days later, after the Japanese refused to surrender despite the attack upon Hiroshima, the U.S. dropped a second atomic bomb named "Fat Man" on the city of Nagasaki. This time the Japanese relented. Officially, the war ended when the Japanese surrendered aboard the USS *Missouri* on September 2, 1945.

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Tibbets never second-guessed or questioned his decision to lead the mission that would drop the world's first atomic bomb. In his mind, he was willing to sacrifice his life or whatever the mission might do to his reputation in order to spare the larger loss of human life and misery that he and many other top military advisers believed a conventional attack upon Japan would provoke. In an interview with the *Columbia Dispatch* in 1975, Tibbets stated "I sleep clearly every night...I knew when we got the assignment, it was going to be an emotional thing...We knew it was going to kill people left and right. But my one driving interest was to do the best job we could to end the killing as quick as possible." Tibbets knew that dropping the bomb would cause controversy, but he was willing to take that on to end the war and save American soldiers.