

**REPORT OF THE FRANCK COMMITTEE ON THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL
IMPLICATIONS OF A DEMONSTRATION OF THE ATOMIC BOMB (FOR A
NON-COMBAT DEMONSTRATION) (JUNE 1945)**

Introduction

The dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and Nagasaki (August 9, 1945) 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 Franck Committee was a group of leading atomic scientists that met early in the summer of 1945 to consider the implications of nuclear technology and its potential military use on Japan. James Franck, who chaired the committee, was a German-born physicist at the University of Chicago and the winner of the 1925 Nobel Prize.

Document Excerpts with Questions

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The way in which the nuclear weapons, now secretly developed in this country, will first be revealed to the world appears of great, perhaps fateful importance.

One possible way — which may particularly appeal to those who consider the nuclear bombs primarily as a secret weapon developed to help win the present war — is to use it without warning on an appropriately selected object in Japan. It is doubtful whether the first available bombs, of comparatively low efficiency and small size, will be sufficient to break the will or ability of Japan to resist, especially given the fact that the major cities like Tōkyō, Nagoya, Osaka and Kōbe already will largely be reduced to ashes by the slower process of ordinary aerial bombing. Certain and perhaps important tactical results undoubtedly can be achieved, but we nevertheless think that the question of the use of the very first available atomic bombs in the Japanese war should be weighed very carefully, not only by military authority,

but by the highest political leadership of this country. If we consider international agreement on total prevention of nuclear warfare as the paramount objective and believe that it can be achieved, this kind of introduction of atomic weapons to the world may easily destroy all our chances of success. Russia, and even allied countries which bear less mistrust of our ways and intentions, as well as neutral countries, will be deeply shocked. It will be very difficult to persuade the world that a nation which was capable of secretly preparing and suddenly releasing a weapon, as indiscriminate as the rocket bomb and a thousand times more destructive, is to be trusted in its proclaimed desire of having such weapons abolished by international agreement. We have large accumulations of poison gas, but do not use them, and recent polls have shown that public opinion in this country would disapprove of such a use even if it would accelerate the winning of the Far Eastern war. It is true, that some irrational element in mass psychology makes gas poisoning more revolting than blasting by explosives, even though gas warfare is in no way more "inhuman" than the war of bombs and bullets. Nevertheless, it is not at all certain that the American public opinion, if it could be enlightened as to the effect of atomic explosives, would support the first introduction by our own country of such an indiscriminate method of wholesale destruction of civilian life.

Thus, from the "optimistic" point of view — looking forward to an international agreement on prevention of nuclear warfare — the military advantages and the saving of American lives, achieved by the sudden use of atomic bombs against Japan, may be outweighed by the ensuing loss of confidence and wave of horror and repulsion, sweeping over the rest of the world, and perhaps dividing even the public opinion at home.

From this point of view a demonstration of the new weapon may best be made before the eyes of representatives of all United Nations, on the desert or a barren island. The best possible atmosphere for the achievement of an international agreement could be achieved if America would be able to say to the world, "You see what weapon we had but did not use. We are ready to renounce its use in the future and to join other nations in working out adequate supervision of the use of this nuclear weapon."

This may sound fantastic, but then in nuclear weapons we have something entirely new in the order of magnitude of destructive power, and if we want to capitalize fully on the advantage which its possession gives us, we must use new and imaginative methods. After such a demonstration the weapon could be used against Japan if a sanction of the United Nations (and of the public opinion at home) could be obtained, perhaps after a preliminary ultimatum to Japan to surrender or at least to evacuate a certain region as an alternative to the total destruction of this target.

It must be stressed that if one takes a pessimistic point of view and discounts the possibilities of an effective international control of nuclear weapons, then the advisability of an early use of nuclear bombs against Japan becomes even more doubtful—quite independently of any humanitarian considerations. If no international agreement is concluded immediately after the first demonstration, this will mean a flying start of an unlimited armaments race. If this race is inevitable, we have all reason to delay its beginning as long as possible in order to increase

our head start still further. ... The benefit to the nation, and the saving of American lives in the future, achieved by renouncing an early demonstration of nuclear bombs and letting the other nations come into the race only reluctantly, on the basis of guess work and without definite knowledge that the "thing does work," may far outweigh the advantages to be gained by the immediate use of the first and comparatively inefficient bombs in the war against Japan. ...

...

Another argument which could be quoted in favor of using atomic bombs as soon as they are available is that so much taxpayers money has been invested in those projects that the Congress and the American public will require a return for their money. The above-mentioned attitude of the American public opinion in the question of the use of poison gas against Japan shows that one can expect, it to understand that a weapon can sometimes be made ready only for use in extreme emergency; and as soon as the potentialities of nuclear weapons will be revealed to the American people, one can be certain that it will support all attempts to make the use of such weapons impossible.

Questions:

1. What arguments did the Franck Committee make against the use of the atomic bombs on Japan?
2. Do you think that this group's suggestion of demonstrating the atomic bomb on "the desert or a barren island" would have been successful in hastening Japan's surrender?
3. Why do you think that the American public did not respond more negatively to the use of the atomic bombs on Japan, as the Franck Committee thought it might?
4. If you had been a member of the Franck Committee, what policy regarding the atomic bombs would you have argued for?