

CELEBRATION AT A COST

Reflections on the End of the War and the Dropping of the Atomic Bombs

World War II concluded with the German surrender on May 8, 1945 (V-E Day) and the surrender of Japan about three months later on August 15, 1945 (V-J Day). By listening to the following voices, students will explore the emotions surrounding the announcement of the end of the war. Americans celebrated victory through block parties, parades, and bonfires, reveling in the relief that the war at home and overseas was finished. For many, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945 played a major role in prompting the Japanese surrender and saving American lives. Unlike Robert “Bob” Carter, who worked as a physicist on the Manhattan Project and witnessed the explosion of an atom bomb, the average American knew little about the capabilities of nuclear weapons. As news about the bomb’s destruction reached the public, Americans struggled to justify victory at the cost of human life. The variety of opinions about the bomb expressed in the stories below largely mirror arguments present in modern-day debates about the decision.

FULL STORY TRANSCRIPTS

HEARING THE NEWS OF VICTORY

The three stories below describe how an average day was transformed into a cause for great celebration in both ordinary and unconventional settings. Leslie Prince Raimond heard the news while with her family on the beach, describing how the announcement—carrying in the wind from local Air Force Base speakers—sounded like a “voice from the heavens.” Fred Israel was on his way from his home in New York City to Naval service boot camp in the Great Lakes region when his train windows were lifted by civilians on the platform to pass around cases of liquor in celebration. Finally, Fenton Martin was in a U.S. port examining the destruction wrought by Japanese kamikaze pilots on aircraft carriers and destroyers when he heard the news that Japan had surrendered.

The War is Over—Leslie Prince Raimond

“So the story that I would like to tell you all and that I do have a memory of, and the memory was always kind of vague and floating along, and I’d never really stopped to analyze it. But I do know that one time, I was at a beach, and a voice from the heavens came down (and this was an isolated beach which I’ll explain more exactly where it was) but this voice came from above which said, “The war is over, the war is over, the war is over,” And I’m with my mom, my sister, some cousins, and everybody’s screaming with glee. Later, much later like last week or something, I’m like how, what was I hearing? We were on this isolated beach. And as it turned out, we were not far from the Whidbey Air Force Base which blasted out over there, over the water. I think it was probably only a couple miles away or maybe only a mile that across the Puget Sound up in Washington state, this voice came out.”

VJ Day on the Train—Fred Israel

“So now I’m in the Navy. We were at Great Lakes for eight weeks, and then you get Boot Leave. So you come home. So I come home to New York City and then I’m going back to Great Lakes. And the day I’m going back to Great Lakes is August 15th, 1945 – the day the war ends. But we’re in a train. So we didn’t really know what was going on. And we pull into Altoona

Pennsylvania. The platform is full of people. The train is full of people in uniform. On the platform – civilians. And we come in. And the doors of course open and they're yelling 'The war's over! The war's over! Japan has surrendered.' And then they go like this [gestures] to pick up the windows. Now that's before the days when they kept the windows closed for air conditioning purposes. And so the windows came up and they now started passing in cases of liquor. For the service men on the train. World War Two was total involvement of the population of the United States. And its children, and its fathers, and your brothers in the war. It was total."

V-J Day Announcement at Naval Yard—Fenton Martin

"I was in the Navy yard working on a dock beside a naval vessel, I think a destroyer, as I recall. And the Navy yard was full at that time of destroyers and even some aircraft carriers that had come in for repairs after concentrated kamikaze attacks where you know the Japanese pilots would commit suicide by just dive bombing into the ships. The guts of those ships were just blown right out. And I remember walking by one of them when over the ship's loud speaker system came, "We have an important announcement to make: the war is over. Japan has surrendered." The head of the office, of course they had mechanical drafting boards and big tables so we had a huge room there with maybe a hundred draftsmen. And the head of the office was there as I came back in, and he was in the process of saying, "Well, it looks like we all better be looking for another job." And he took his mechanical drafting board and turned it upside down, and everybody started laughing. But, of course, there was a riot of celebration, as much as you can do in an electrical drafting room. But, yeah, there was a great sense of pleasure and relief, because no doubt, the casualties were going to continue if we didn't [end the war]."

CELEBRATION AND RELIEF

The news of victory brought a wave of celebration across the country, from the streets of Philadelphia to the farms of Iowa. Americans hosted parties and parades, screamed with joy and wept with relief, and celebrated the end of rationing by burning worn rubber tires. As described by Mary Jane Rambo, those who returned from war looked forward to starting new lives with their families in a post-war world, while Elaine Figgs and her classmates honored and mourned soldiers who didn't live to see the results of their sacrifice.

VE Day Celebration in Philadelphia—Polly Campbell

"It was dramatically different. I mean you can't say you're enthusiastic about war, but we wanted our men to be over there, and we followed every day the battles and what was going on and when we got victory, that was very exciting. My father being a veteran of the first world war, said on VE Day, he said, "Let's go downtown, I missed the end of the first world war so we're going down now." So we got on the train and went downtown. I didn't really know what we were going for, but we just milled around and there were just people milling around. And the famous picture you may have seen of the soldier with the nurse—well I didn't happen to see that, but that was I guess [laughs] what was going on. So then we got on the train and came home again. But that was it."

VJ Day Celebration—Lyle Feisel

“I remember more about V-J Day because, you know, well, I don’t know why because. I guess it was a greater celebration because it was really the end of the war. I think I remember these things. I remember them, whether it’s true or not, I don’t know, but I remember them. It was in August something or other, and one of the crops that was growing around in Iowa where I grew up was sweet corn. And at that time, sweet corn was all picked by hand so you do it out of the field with these wagons and picked sweet corn. And the tradition there was for neighbors to help each other so we were picking sweet corn. I was driving the tractor in the field, and suddenly somebody started yelling, “Hey, what do you hear, what do you hear!” And we lived about two miles from this little town of Tama, Iowa. And we heard the whistle at the paper mill going off, just continuously. And pretty soon somebody came running out, and said, “The War is over!; The War is over!” Well, that was the end of the sweet corn. Everybody took off for town, and they even took us little kids along which was kind of interesting because they were all going in to party and celebrate. So we went in, and I can still remember they had a big bonfire in the middle of the town. They were burning tires. Saving tires was one of the big deals, and we don’t need to save those suckers anymore so we burned tires. It was a great celebration. We had a lot of relief because we all had brothers and sisters and cousins and what not in the military, and this was now over with so—quite a thrill.”

End of the War—Mary Jane Rambo

“Oh, the whole town was ablaze. Everybody was running around screaming and crying and going to the bars. People were having parties, and it was fun. It was fun. We had a parade. Then the guys came home, and the girls got married and started their families. We had – we still have it down at this far end of town – a place called Hollingsworth Manor. During the war, they built these houses – they were double houses – and that’s where a lot of the war workers lived that had families. After the war, that became the place where all the young men who came home and got married started their married lives.”

Board of Soldier’s Names—Elaine Figgs

“And at the post office, they installed a large board, and they would put the names of the soldiers that were there. And, if I remember correctly, VE Day, we marched up to that board, and you went by class. I was in a junior class, so the seniors went first; then the juniors next; then the sophomores; then the freshmen. And they all went up to that board, and they called out the names. I think it was the mayor of the town who called out the names of the ones who were on the board. Everyone was proud that we had come through. Of course, we had, I believe it was three or four, gold star mothers that were also up there that day. That they had lost a son. One of them was a good friend of our families that lost a boy in the Navy, and, of course, we knew. It was a small town. We knew just about all of ’em, you know, when they were deceased and bring ’em home for the burial. But that was a sad time.”

“WHAT IS A NUCLEAR BOMB?”

As a graduate student at Purdue University, Bob Carter was invited to work on a top-secret physics project in the desert of New Mexico—the famed Manhattan Project that created and tested the atomic bomb. Carter describes both the wonder of possibility and the weight of responsibility that simultaneously struck those Americans who helped create the bomb, a weapon

he never expected the United States government to use on civilians. For average Americans, the bomb remained elusive, as words like “atomic bomb” and “uranium” had yet to enter the general vocabulary; as a result, many Americans, much like Thomas Stanley, were quite confused when they first heard learned of the explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Feelings on Seeing the Bomb—Robert “Bob” Carter

“It was—I guess overwhelming is a word that might fit, but I’m not really sure what overwhelming means. It lighted up the whole sky. There was a very, very bright flash and then the cloud of material that was the cause of the explosion or the result of the explosion started rising, and it was visible. Also, it was self-visible, self-lighting, or something I don’t know, self-luminous so we could see the cloud rising. In about a minute, the shock wave arrived because light travels much faster through the atmosphere than sound does so it took about a minute for the sound to arrive after the flash of light. That was almost overwhelming second phase of the whole thing. But it was—I had never really observed a big explosion of any kind before, and so I didn’t quite know what to expect. The whole thing was a surprise to me.”

It’s probably the biggest change in human existence that man has been able to create, I think it is about the way we felt. But I remember sort of feeling too what I would guess parents (see I was not married and didn’t have a family and stuff) but I guessed what parents must think when they first see their newborn baby, and they think, “Wow! Look we made a miracle, we did a miracle here. Look at what we made.” And then they think, “Gosh, but we have to protect and take care of this for the rest of our lives.” I think that’s kind of the way I felt at the time because I felt it was a new phenomenon in the existence of mankind. It could be used for good or evil, or good or bad depending on people.

Reactions to the Bomb on Hiroshima—Robert “Bob” Carter

“Well, at the beginning of the project there was a lot of uncertainty among the scientists whether a nuclear bomb was even feasible, whether it could be built, or whether the parameters involved were sufficient to make it function as a bomb. And so, that was a large part of the investigations at the beginning. Then when it became more and more certain that a bomb would, in fact, detonate, then we started trying to understand the magnitude of the explosion and the results of it, the mechanical effects of an explosion. So, we realized if it worked as we had predicted, it would be a huge explosion, a bigger explosion than mankind had ever seen before. I guess it was partially scientific inquisition to go ahead and do it if it were possible and then also a little bit of concern how it would be used by the U.S. government if and when it was possible to build one. I don’t remember thinking in terms of it being used to kill a lot of people. I don’t remember thinking that through very much at the time. I guess I was surprised that the United States government had done it, had actually used it on a city. I guess I thought, “Golly, a bomb is supposed to be used on the military installations and military people. It’s not supposed to be used on cities with civilians.” I guess that was my immediate reaction.”

Hearing one of the Atomic Scientists Speak at Yale—Thomas O. Stanley

“At Yale, one of the atomic scientists had come to [campus] and talked. And in the bowl session afterwards, somebody said, “Are there any explosives greater than what we’re now using that may come into being?” And he said, “Of course, there’s the uranium bomb.” And we didn’t know what he was talking about. And that’s as much as he said.

And so, I remember a friend of mine on the beach [when] the atom bomb was dropped came and he said, “There’s been a very powerful bomb dropped in Japan.” I said, “Oh yes, it’s uranium!” [laughs] And [I] was looked upon very suspiciously! You know, I figured out that’s what they must’ve been talking about.”

Hearing about Hiroshima—Lew Halin

“I also remember the day that I was coming home from school, and I guess I was a freshman in high school. The school was quite a bit of distance from my house so I had to take a trolley car to get there. It went down to the station where all the trolley cars originated at the end of the run where I got off to go to high school. And I remember coming back in to that station to take the trolley car home after school, and I heard the announcer announcing that we had dropped an atomic bomb. But it was the A-bomb on Hiroshima —that was harnessing the power of the sun. And, of course, a couple days later, they dropped the second one, and then it was all over. Of course, nobody really had any idea of what they were talking about, at that time. Of course, the newspapers had crude pictures of things; I mean, they really didn’t know what (laughs). Nobody knew what a nuclear bomb was at that time.”

OPINIONS ABOUT THE BOMB

As many Americans saw it, the end of the war was hastened by the detonation of two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For many Americans, much like John Willey and Cynthia V. Ramsey, the decision saved American soldiers from enduring a “bloodbath” in Japan. Others were shocked by the horrific destruction the bombs left in their wake and questioned whether there were alternative— and less destructive—strategies to have brought the war to an end.

Confidence in Roosevelt and Truman’s Decision to Drop the Bombs—John Willey

“I had an awful lot of confidence, I was born and raised a Republican but everybody liked Roosevelt. They never showed anything degrading about Roosevelt. Everybody knew he was paralyzed but you never saw a picture of him leaning on his crutches, either behind the podium or sitting down or something— everybody liked Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt {inaudible}. And when he died I just thought I’m never gonna get home, you know. I thought that Old Harry Truman was a weak sister and would God bless him {laughter} he made the decision and as far as I’m concerned the right one. It would’ve been a forever bloodbath if we had gone in and tried to occupy.”

Hearing of the Atomic Bomb—Cynthia V. Ramsey

“I was on KP, peeling potatoes. KP means kitchen, kitchen, I don’t remember. Anyway, I was cutting, peeling potatoes or something like that when the atom bomb was dropped. And I’ll never forget how happy we all were. By that time my husband was on his way; he was in the Pacific Ocean on his way to invade Japan. And none of those boys would have survived, I think. So I was very happy when the bomb was dropped, saving so many of our lives.

How’d you hear about it while peeling potatoes?

Well, it wasn't until I got off, got out of there. People were all talking about it. I heard it from others. I didn't read newspapers then, I don't believe, and we didn't have a radio either. But, other people read newspapers and had radios."

End of the War—Mary Dougherty Wood

"I remember VE Day very well — that was terribly exciting. I was not in an exciting place. I was in Centreville which wasn't very exciting to me. It wasn't like those pictures you see in cities with everybody kissing everybody. And then, VJ Day. I do remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the two bombs going off — the horror of that.

Well, you were terribly led. Well, of course the surrender of Japan didn't come until a while after that. So you didn't know. And it was all kind of horrifying, the idea of this awful thing — the mushroom cloud and all that stuff. The surrender in Japan in a way, I think it might have been like an anti-climax. It was really over. I mean, the war was really over. I guess it wasn't if people had been shot afterwards but you knew who was going to win by then."

Atomic Bombs on VJ Day—Helen Tyson

"HT: I don't remember them specifically, but I remember everybody saying, 'The war is over! The war is over!' And 'Oh yippeedoodles' And then we would hear, well there was a little fight here where the people had not yet heard that the war was over and people were killed. We didn't hear much about prisoners of war. At least as a child, I did not hear much about prisoners of war. But when it was over, some of that started to leak out, that there were still people over in Europe who had not been released. Of course, the atomic bomb was such big news that we heard an awful lot about the damage in Japan, or Hiroshima, because of that bomb. And you know, many years later, Bob [my husband] and I went to Pearl Harbor as a tour, and we stopped at a museum for Hiroshima, and they had in the museum a stone lintel, maybe a foot by two-and-a-half feet, and there were marks on it. And they said they've begun to fade now, but what had happened was somebody had been sitting there when the bomb exploded, and material from the body was soaked into the concrete, and stained it. It was kind of eerie to think that somebody's tissues were on that stone. We didn't hear that much gory stuff during the war. after the war. But, we did hear a lot of people disfigured. And certainly many years later the effects of the chemicals on the genes so that they had deformed children. I think to this day they still are suffering the effects of that.

MD: At the time, the United States [citizens] supported the droppings of the two bombs?

HT: Oh, yeah. Yes. We'd already been hearing that bombs had been dropping. On the newsreels, they would frequently show a plane with bombs going 'weeoo'. So the atomic bomb, to me, was just another bomb, and I was glad that it ended the war. But I did not realize that it was radioactive, that it did damage as extensive as it really did."

FEATURED STORIES TRANSCRIPTS

The War is Over—Leslie Prince Raimond

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Additional Sources

End of the War:

1. V-E Day Panel on the National WWII Monument, Washington DC:
<https://www.nps.gov/wwii/learn/historyculture/v-e-day.htm>
2. “The Times Square Kiss: Iconic Photography and Civic Renewal in U.S. Public Culture:”
<https://academic.oup.com/jah/article/94/1/122/843016>
3. Summary of Post-War Celebrations: <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2015/09/02/victory-americans-everywhere-celebrated-the-end-of-world-war-ii-in-1945/>

Atomic Bomb:

1. Voices of The Manhattan Project—Interview with General Paul Tibbets:
<https://www.manhattanprojectvoices.org/oral-histories/general-paul-tibbets-%E2%80%93-reflections-hiroshima> (recommend stopping at minute 4:30)
2. Documents Concerning the Dropping of the Bomb:
<https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/online-collections/decision-to-drop-atomic-bomb>
3. Densho Archives—Three Oral History Interviews with Japanese-Americans Reflecting on the Atomic Bomb: <https://ddr.densho.org/interviews/ddr-densho-1002-7-34/>
4. Battle Over a Smithsonian Enola Gay Exhibit:
<https://www.atomicheritage.org/history/controversy-over-enola-gay-exhibition>
5. Pew Research Center: “70 Years After Hiroshima, Opinions Have Shifted on Use of Atomic Bomb:”
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/04/70-years-after-hiroshima-opinions-have-shifted-on-use-of-atomic-bomb/>

Questions to Consider

Key Questions:

1. How was the end of the war celebrated throughout the country? What activities and behaviors were used to express the joy of victory?
2. Why did Americans celebrate? What did the war’s end mean to Americans tangibly?
3. What did the public understand about nuclear bombs before they were dropped on Japan?

Extension Questions:

1. What did the end of the war mean for the Homefront? Consider effects on changes in the economy, opportunities for women and minorities, and civilian mobilization.
2. Who may have not been as enthusiastic to see the war come to an end? Why?
3. In your opinion, how instrumental was the role of the atomic bomb in ending the war? In other words, was it necessary to ensure an Allied victory? Why or why not?
4. To what extent do you think dropping the atomic bomb on Japan affected nuclear proliferation? How did it impact the Cold War that developed shortly thereafter? Explain your position.

Essay Questions:

1. What were the opposing arguments regarding use of the atomic bombs? Use evidence from the stories above. How did knowledge about atomic weapons and their power, or lack thereof, inform an understanding of the decision in 1945? What other factors may have contributed to an individual's stance on the atomic bomb in 1945?
2. How has the debate about the development and use of the atomic weapons changed throughout the latter half of the 20th century? What political and cultural factors may help explain these differences in opinion?