Atom Bomb Exemplar Grade 9

**Prompt: Write an essay that compares and contrasts a primary argument in each text that you have read regarding the decision to drop the atomic bomb. Your essay should explain how effectively you think each author supported that claim with reasoning and/or evidence. Be sure to use evidence form the three texts to support your ideas.**

What can we learn from a war that killed hundreds upon thousands, including innocent citizens? There may or may not be any lessons. Perhaps more imperative, how do we assess the decisions that led to those deaths? In 1945, the United States led by President Truman made a fateful decision to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima after Japan would not concede to a full surrender. This assault, combined with a second nuclear attack two days later, killed more than 250,000 people. What becomes clear from considering a variety of opinions given prior to and after the event is that scientists and politicians were carefully weighting the risks and potential costs of such an action, but that, in the end, they differed on which threats posed the most significant danger.

From the perspective of the scientific community, the fact that discovery is an ongoing process is preeminent. There is no clarity on where things will yet lead, thus they argue we must proceed with caution. Two weeks before the first atomic bomb was dropped, a group of 70 distinguished scientists wrote a petition to President Truman requesting that he not use any atomic weapons unless Japan refused to surrender. Their reservations stem from a valid fear of the unknown. First, they emphasize that we are merely at the precipice of understanding what kind of power nuclear weapons are. As with all science, this process of discovery will continue to unfold – and should. Further, as atomic bombs are only the ‘first step’ in a journey wherein we cannot yet fathom “the destructive power that will become available,” this group of scientists warns the United States to proceed cautiously. The United States is a world leader and if our President decides to drop a bomb, he opens a door…to who knows what. Second, and more importantly, they underscore the potential moral consequences of such an attack. Not only have we developed atomic power first, we are a country with worldwide authority. Underscoring the gravity of such a role, they tell the President it is our “solemn responsibility” to act as the moral compass for the rest of the world. We have loosed upon the world these forces of destruction – forces whose potential we do not even understand – and we must thereby be the most restrained in our application of them.

President Truman was not blind to the momentous ethical weight of his decision. Indeed, dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima was “the most difficult decision of his life.” However, acting as the protector of a nation and keeping in the forefront of his mind the need to end a bloody war, Truman saw the continued loss of human lives as the most important threat. Bombing campaigns had recently been used before in Dresden and Tokyo and Truman did not see this further act as any different. Certainly, he did not and could not have anticipated the scale of destruction caused by an atomic bomb. Not even scientists anticipated the radiation sickness that was to follow. Truman was, and needed to be, focused on the immediate – and the immediate generates different needs: ending a war that both American citizens and soldiers were tired of fighting, showing strength in the face of Japan’s refusal to surrender, applying rationality with an almost mathematical exactness wherein lives lost now are weighted against potential lives lost as a long war drags on and becomes who knows how long or how much more ruinous. He felt he needed to act now rather than sit on his hands hoping a bad situation would not worsen. Whether or not these were genuine needs, we cannot know. However, Truman thought this way because he was the leader of the nation, the protector of the people, and because he himself held thousands, possibly millions, of lives in his hands.

As the “mastermind” behind the Manhattan Project, Robert Oppenheimer bridged the link between politics and science. While the pure scientists urged caution and the President felt action necessary as many lives were at risk, Oppenheimer lived in the gray areas. His speech, given after the bombings, confirms and even justifies the genuine nature of motives expressed by the scientific community: concern about an arms race, the need to more comprehensively grasp the reach of nuclear weapons before unleashing them. Nonetheless, he implicates scientists as being motivated by a potentially darker force – that of the “organic necessity” of scientific progress. Oppenheimer repeatedly emphasizes humility. He is tentative to call himself a scientist, suggesting his own regrets. He confesses to his audience of fellow scientists that he has nothing “very radical to say, or anything that will strike most of you with a great flash of enlightenment.” Yet, as he humbles himself before everyone, he, in fact, does have something of great significance to say. As one of a very small number that has seen both the political arguments for and the scientific arguments against dropping the bomb, and further as someone involved who now knows the aftermath, he is in a unique position to request that this moment be one in which to assess with new eyes the relationship “between science and common sense.” Despite all he knows, he does not request the undertaking of any particular stance or future direction. What he does ask for is honesty – and an ending to the historical antagonism between science and our foundational social mores. Science is indeed threatened, but perhaps not so much by outside forces, as by scientists themselves who want to cut off their work from its real applications. Nuclear power is not “an idea – it is a development and a reality.” In other words, scientists, being inclined towards the greatest free sharing of ideas, must also recognize the very real social, political, and human consequences of their work.

So how effectively did each support his claim? Truman cites compelling concerns. The loss of lives he had already witnessed in wars, and impending future continued losses are powerful arguments he raises. The group of scientists raise concerns about the unknown, the potential destructive power of the bomb and the role of the USA as a moral compass in the world. Oppenheimer raises similarly chilling concerns that could be viewed as even more cautionary when he raises questions about the fundamental conflicts between the pursuit of science and the ramifications of this on human lives as well. As a group, scientists may tend towards optimism. Oppenheimer pleads that they contain this optimism, that they not be dismissive of the deleterious effects of nuclear power – whatever the beneficial aspects may prove to be. Though this may seem pessimistic, Oppenheimer sees with the widest eyes. He was involved in both the political and the purely scientific aspects of developing the atomic bomb, and Truman was not. Moreover, he gives this speech after the bombings and thereby can begin to reflect on decisions already made…and many more yet to come.