LESSON PLAN:

ATOMIC BOMBS

The Most Terrible Thing, but Possibly the Most Useful: Evaluating the US Decision to Drop the Atomic Bombs

(Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ds-05458.)

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the first successful atomic bomb test in July 1945, President Harry S. Truman wrote in his diary that "this atomic bomb . . . seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful." The president's conflicted feelings about the bomb captured the divergent poles in a debate that has raged since he authorized its use against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. While some historians contend that the use of atomic weapons saved American and Japanese lives by speeding the war's end, others maintain that the bombs were neither necessary nor justified since other means may have been available to end the war. In this lesson, students engage in this debate by examining primary and secondary sources—and the evidence contained within them—in order to determine which interpretation of the decision to use atomic bombs they find most convincing.

OBJECTIVE

By analyzing a range of primary and secondary source materials, students will develop an interpretation of the US use of atomic weapons against Japan and provide evidence to support their conclusion.

GRADE LEVEL

7–12

TIME REQUIREMENT

1–2 class periods

MATERIALS

This lesson plan uses evidence strips included as inserts with the printed guide and online at **ww2classroom.org.**

ONLINE RESOURCES

ww2classroom.org

- **The primary source images and evidence strips referenced in this lesson plan are available online.**
- **Lawrence Johnston Oral History**
- **The Bomb Video**
- **Operation Downfall Map**
- **Recording of Harry S. Truman's Atomic Bomb Address, August 9, 1945**

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8

Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

CONTENT ERA 8, STANDARD 3B

The student is able to evaluate the decision to employ nuclear weapons against Japan and assess later controversies over the decision.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 3

The student is able to compare competing historical narratives and evaluate major debates among historians concerning alternative interpretations of the past.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 4

The student is able to support interpretations with historical evidence in order to construct closely reasoned arguments rather than facile opinions.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 4

The student is able to interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created; testing the data source for its credibility, authority, authenticity, internal consistency, and completeness; and detecting and evaluating bias, distortion, and propaganda by omission, suppression, or invention of facts.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 5

The student is able to evaluate alternative courses of action, keeping in mind the information available at the time, in terms of ethical considerations, the interests of those affected by the decision, and the long- and short-term consequences of each.

PROCEDURE

1. Use the **Overview Essay** to introduce your students to the US development and use of atomic weapons and to the debate among historians over the reasons for dropping the bombs, the alternatives that existed at the time, and whether the bombs were necessary to end the war.
2. Introduce the two interpretations from historians Sadao Asada and Barton Bernstein regarding the use of atomic weapons during World War II (page 87), informing students that they will be examining multiple primary and secondary sources in order to determine which interpretation they find most convincing. As you introduce the interpretations, have students identify the similarities and differences between them and clarify difficult vocabulary.
3. Distribute copies of the **Evidence Collection Worksheets** (pages 91–92) to students and explain that they will use the worksheets to gather and organize evidence according to the interpretation that the evidence best supports. Inform students that they will also be responsible for explaining how individual pieces of evidence support a particular interpretation. You may need to give each student multiple copies of the worksheet.
4. Divide the class into groups and distribute one set of the **images** (pages 88–90 and online at **ww2classroom.org**) and the **evidence strips** (available as an insert with the printed guide and at **ww2classroom.org**) to each group. Alternatively, you may want to have students work in pairs, assigning each pair a single evidence strip or image to examine and discuss before rotating to analyze additional sources.
5. Instruct students to assign each image and evidence strip to at least one interpretation and to record that evidence and an explanation of how it supports the interpretation on the appropriate **Evidence Collection Worksheet**. Remind students to be attentive to the date, origin, and type of each source they are examining and to consider how those features affect the source's reliability. To model this exercise, you may want to highlight evidence from one of the strips and/or images that supports each interpretation and provide explanations for each of those pieces of evidence before students practice independently.
6. After students have assigned each source to an interpretation, have them identify the interpretation for which they have compiled the most convincing supporting evidence and explanations.
7. Have students engage in a historical debate about their preferred interpretations, drawing upon the evidence they gathered to support their claims.

ASSESSMENT

You will be able to assess students' understanding of the relevant standards through the notes they take on their Evidence Collection Worksheets, their discussion, and their homework assignment.

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

- For homework, have students write a 250-word text panel for a museum display about the US use of atomic bombs during World War II. Emphasize to students that, given space limitations, they will need to choose an argument or point of view in order to frame their narrative.
- Have students learn more about the atomic bombs through the oral histories and photographs that are part of the Museum's Digital Collections. Students can find relevant oral histories and photographs by searching the Collections at http://www.ww2online.org/advanced and entering either "atomic bomb," "Hiroshima," or "Nagasaki" in the search field. Of particular note are the photos of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the bombing as well as the oral-history interviews with *Enola Gay* navigator Theodore "Dutch" Van Kirk and Manhattan Project scientist Lawrence Johnston. An excerpt from Johnston's interview is also included in the online materials accompanying this curriculum volume.

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

- In order to have students explore the ethical dimensions of the atomic bombs and the responsibility of historians to weigh ethical considerations when interpreting the past, ask them to compare the following statements:

"I was a twenty-one-year-old second lieutenant of infantry leading a rifle platoon . . . When the atom bombs were dropped and news began to circulate that 'operation Olympic' would not, after all, be necessary, when we learned to our astonishment that we would not be obliged in a few months to rush up the beaches near Tokyo assault-firing while being machine-gunned, mortared, shelled, for all the practiced phlegm of our tough facades we broke down and cried with relief and joy. We were going to live. We were going to grow to adulthood after all. The killing was all going to be over, and peace was actually going to be the state of things."

Paul Fussell, "Thank God for the Atomic Bomb," The New Republic, *August 26–29, 1981.*

"A year after the bomb was dropped, Miss Sasaki was a cripple; Mrs. Nakamura was destitute; Father Kleinsorge was back in the hospital; Dr. Sasaki was not capable of the work he once could do; Dr. Fujii had lost the thirty-room hospital it took him many years to acquire, and had no prospects of rebuilding it; Mr. Tanimoto's church had been ruined and he no longer had his exceptional vitality. The lives of these six people, who were among the luckiest in Hiroshima, would never be the same. What they thought of their experiences and of the use of the atomic bomb was, of course, not unanimous. One feeling they did seem to share, however, was a curious kind of elated community spirit, something like that of the Londoners after the blitz—a pride in the way they and their fellow-survivors had stood up to a dreadful ordeal."

John Hersey, Hiroshima *(1946).*

"War has grown steadily more barbarous, more destructive, more debased. Now, with the release of atomic energy, man's ability to destroy himself is nearly complete."

Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," Harper's, *February 1947.*

TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ATOMIC BOMB

INTERPRETATION 1

"This essay suggests that, given the intransigence of the Japanese military, there were few 'missed opportunities' for earlier peace, and that the alternatives available to President Truman in the summer of 1945 were limited. In the end, Japan needed 'external pressure' in the form of the atomic bombs for its government to decide to surrender."

Sadao Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender: A Reconsideration," Pacific Historical Review *67, no. 4 (1998): 477–512.*

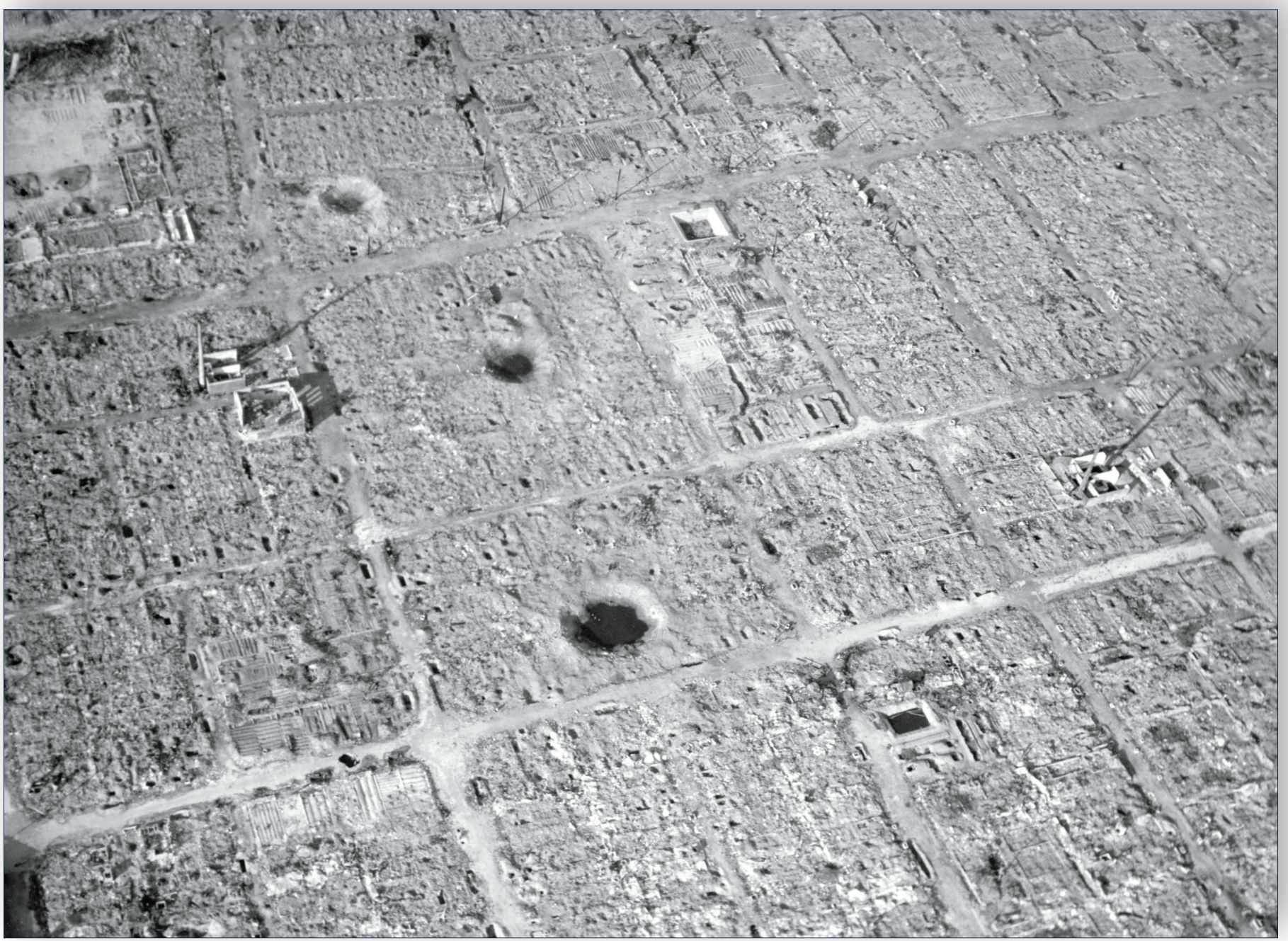
INTERPRETATION 2

"The choices for the Truman administration in 1945 were not simply the A-bomb versus invasion, or even the A-bomb and invasion. There were other strategies, both diplomatic and military, that the administration—had it desired—might have chosen instead of the atomic bombing. It was important to realize that the administration had felt no desire to avoid using the A-bomb and thus did not seek ways by early August to end the war without the atomic bombing."

Barton J. Bernstein, "Introducing the Interpretive Problems of Japan's 1945 Surrender: A Historiographical Essay on Recent Literature in the West," in The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisals, *ed. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).*

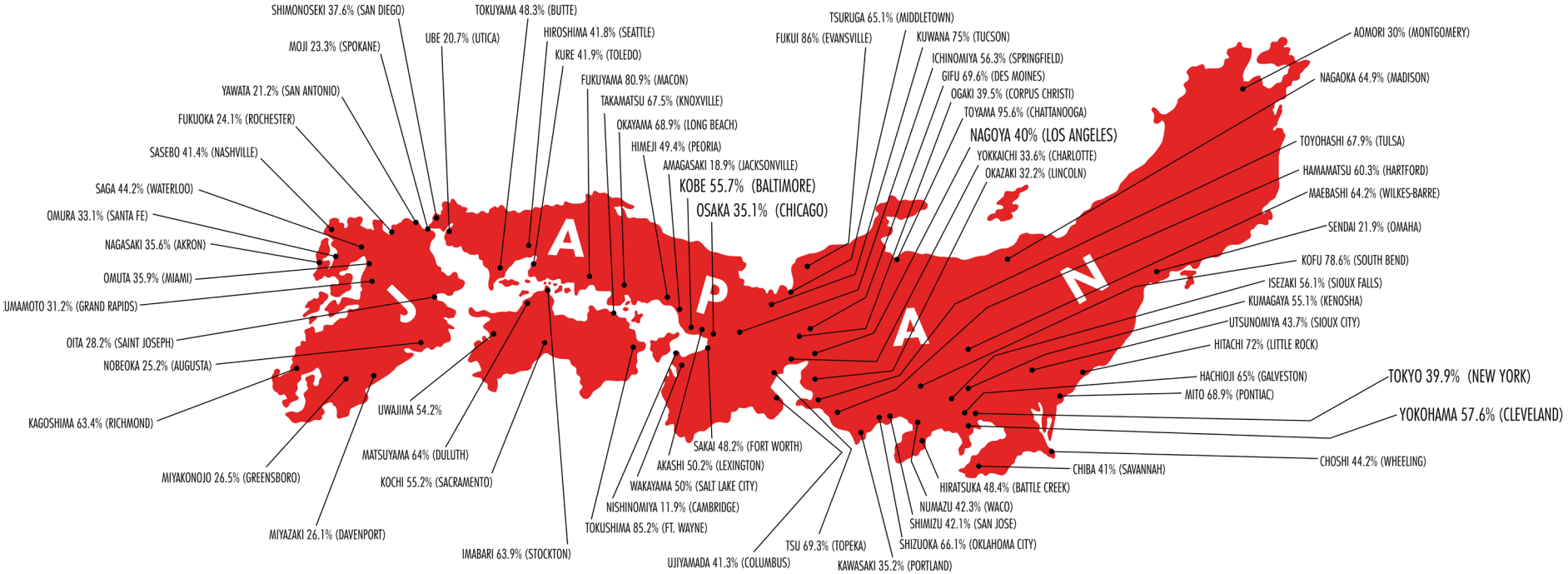
Returning from the Potsdam Conference, President Harry S. Truman prepares his "report to the nation" aboard the USS *Augusta,* August 6, 1945.

(Image: United States Army Signal Corps. Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, 63-1453-47.)



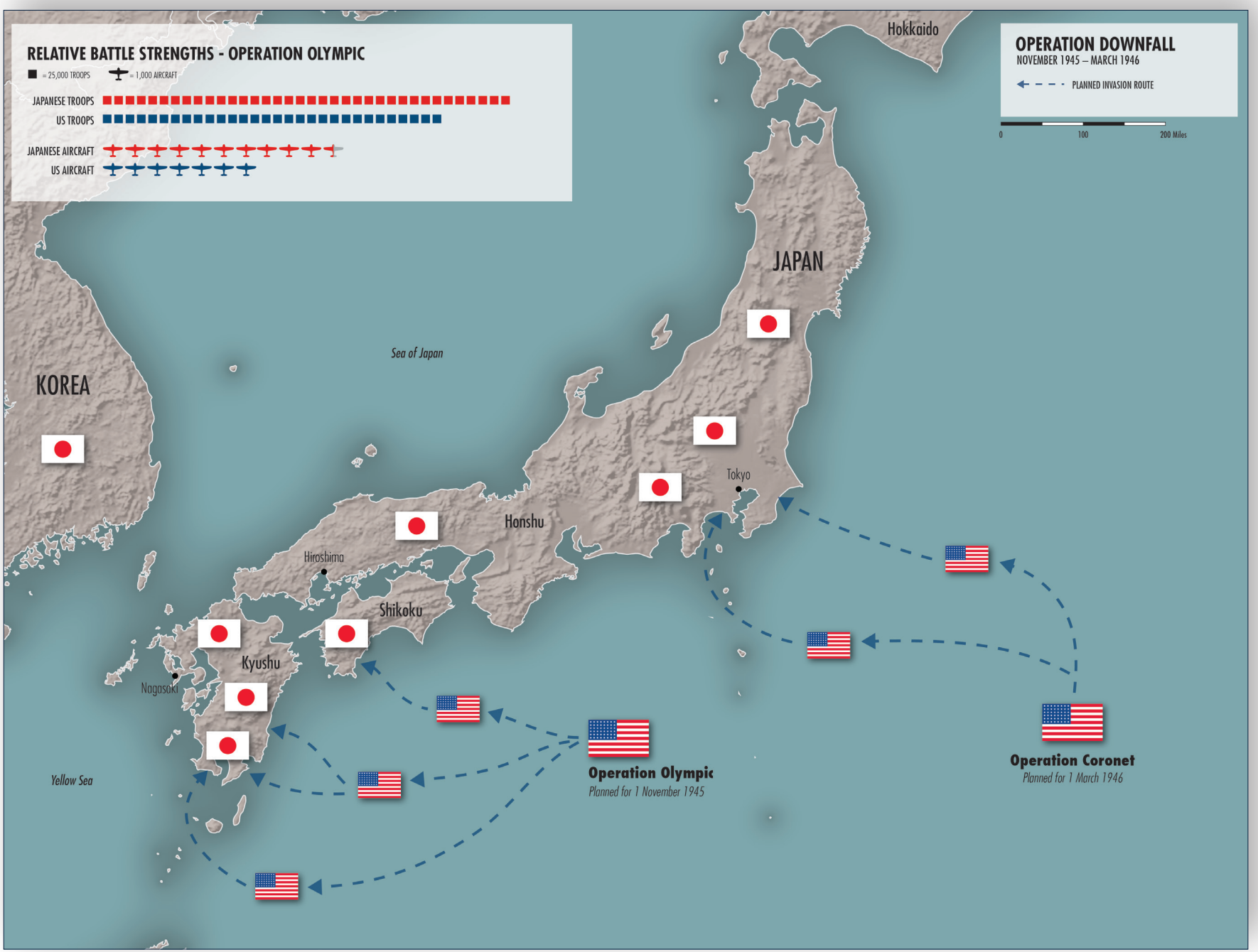
Osaka, Japan, following American firebombing, June 1, 1945.

(Image: National Archives and Records Administration, 342-FH-3A-3773.)



This map of Japan shows the principal industrial cities which were burned out by B-29 incendiary attacks. Figures indicate what percent of the city was destroyed. For comparison, each city is paired with a US city of approximately the same size.

This map, produced after the war, shows the extent of the damage inflicted upon Japanese cities as a result of US B-29 firebomb attacks. For comparison, each Japanese city is paired with a US city of approximately the same size.
(Image: Office of War Information.)



As the United States prepared for Operation Downfall, the largest amphibious operation ever planned, Japan initiated a massive troop buildup to defend its home islands. *(Image: The National WWII Museum.)*

YOUR NAME: **DATE:**

INTERPRETATION 1

Directions: For each primary or secondary source that you examine, record any evidence that you believe supports the interpretation below. For each piece of evidence you record, write a brief explanation of how or why it supports the interpretation. Ask for an additional copy of this sheet if you run out of space.

Interpretation: "This essay suggests that, given the intransigence of the Japanese military, there were few 'missed opportunities' for earlier peace and that the alternatives available to President Truman in the summer of 1945 were limited. In the end, Japan needed 'external pressure' in the form of the atomic bombs for its government to decide to surrender."

Sadao Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender: A Reconsideration," Pacific Historical Review *67, no. 4 (1998): 477–512.*

EVIDENCE

1:

Explanation:

2:

Explanation:

3:

Explanation:

4:

Explanation:

5:

Explanation:

YOUR NAME: **DATE:**

INTERPRETATION 2

Directions: For each primary or secondary source that you examine, record any evidence that you believe supports the interpretation below. For each piece of evidence you record, write a brief explanation of how or why it supports the interpretation. Ask for an additional copy of this sheet if you run out of space.

Interpretation: "The choices for the Truman administration in 1945 were not simply the A-bomb versus invasion, or even the A-bomb and invasion. There were other strategies, both diplomatic and military, that the administration—had it desired—might have chosen instead of the atomic bombing. It was important to realize that the administration had felt no desire to avoid using the A-bomb and thus did not seek ways by early August to end the war without the atomic bombing."

Barton J. Bernstein, "Introducing the Interpretive Problems of Japan's 1945 Surrender: A Historiographical Essay on Recent Literature in the West," in The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisals, *ed. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).*

EVIDENCE

1:

Explanation:

2:

Explanation:

3:

Explanation:

4:

Explanation:

5:

Explanation: