

## General Historical Background

In early 1945, the United States shifted its attention from Europe to the Pacific. Japan remained defiant and unwilling to surrender despite the destruction of the majority of the Japanese Air Force and Navy in the Philippines. American naval forces endured brutal fighting and kamikaze attacks. American land forces experienced savage fighting on Okinawa and Iwo Jima.

In 1942, the United States, China, and Great Britain decided to require the unconditional surrender of Japan. As the war dragged on, American military commanders in the region grew increasingly frustrated with Japan's refusal to surrender and apprehensive over the anticipated casualties American forces would suffer invading the Japanese home islands. In early 1945, the atomic bomb had not yet been successfully tested. Military leaders needed to degrade military production and soften up Japan's defenses in preparation for a ground assault.

The U.S. had signed international treaties before the war, which banned the indiscriminate bombing of cities to kill civilians. As the war dragged on, the U.S. fought to capture airstrips in the Mariana Islands (including Saipan and Tinian) and moved the new B-29 Superfortress bombers there.

The Japanese in World War II bombed civilians and inflicted brutal atrocities on civilians in the places that they conquered. The Japanese bombed civilian centers in China with brutal disregard for civilians. This included its infamous Unit 731, a covert operation that experimented on Chinese people to see the impacts of chemical and biological weapons.

The new B-29 Superfortress bombers, based out of Saipan and Tinian, were used in daylight raids to attack Japanese military installations, but these raids were inaccurate and minimally effective.

General Curtis LeMay was appointed the new commander of the 21<sup>st</sup> Bomber Command on January 20, 1945. LeMay advocated for the firebombing of Japanese cities to spare the American lives that would be lost in an invasion of the home islands, and to quickly end the war with a Japanese surrender. He was given the freedom to conduct these raids, and he started with a surprise bombing raid on the capital city of Tokyo.

LeMay authorized the use of incendiary bombs in a bombing attack on the night of March 9, 1945. The 334 B-29's that flew this mission did not have specific military targets, such as buildings. Their mission was to destroy a large swath of the city of Tokyo known to be rich in military industries based in factories as well as in residential homes. These planes flew in at a low altitude to catch the anti-aircraft gunners off guard and delivered their ordnance on the citizens of Tokyo.



Map, *The Pacific and Adjacent Theaters, 1942* (cropped, with stars added), U.S. Center of Military History.

## General Historical Background cont.

The effect of the bombing far surpassed the expectations of American commanders. Aided by a strong wind, the bombs started massive fires, which raged out of control in the densely packed neighborhoods of paper and wood houses. The "fire tornadoes" that were created were so intense that they burned everything in their path and were preceded by superheated plumes of poisonous gases that overcame victims before they were incinerated. In that single night, over 100,000 Japanese civilians, many of them women and children, were killed as fires raged across the city and burned large sections to the ground. More than one million were left homeless. This was, and still is, the single greatest number of people killed by a single air raid in the history of modern warfare.

Bodies that were charred black were everywhere, and the stench of human flesh burning nearly overcame some of the American pilots in the air. Survivors recounted scenes of unimaginable horror. Follow-up raids destroyed large swaths of Kobe, Osaka, and Nagoya with, further raids destroying even more of Tokyo. In the following few months, 66 cities were targeted. In July, the U.S. military began dropping leaflets on the few cities that had been spared so that civilians could flee before they were bombed. It is estimated that anywhere between 300,000 to 400,000 people died in the raids on these cities.

On July 16, 1945, the first atomic bomb was successfully tested in New Mexico. President Truman shifted his attention to the use of the atomic weapon. On August 6, 1945, the first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, and three days later a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. On September 2, 1945, Japan formally surrendered.

Tomorrow's mock trial case is based on a hypothetical lawsuit brought by the country of Japan in the International Court of Justice in 1970 seeking damages against the United States of \$20 billion for loss of human life, destruction of property, and for the violation of international human rights law.



Photograph, Tokyo burns under B-29 fire bomb assault, May 26, 1945, Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-111427).

### Sources:

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