support of China and her teeming population. But as an ally China turned out to be weaker than expected and her leader, Chiang Kai
shek (Jiang Jieshi), seemed more interested in propping up his corrupt regime than in fighting the Japanese. Thus, shortly before his death, Roosevelt accepted General MacArthur’s advice to retake the Philippines as a springboard for an assault on the Japanese mainland. Later, MacArthur returned to the Philippines as he had vowed, and after ferocious battles featuring kamikaze planes, the strategic islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa fell to the United States Navy and marines between March and June 1945. American forces had been staging light attacks on the Japanese homeland from the islands of Guam and Saipan. But the character of the attacks now changed. Assuming that Japan could be bombed into submission, military strategists ordered raids on crowded cities using incendiary and napalm bombs. The destruction was horrifying. Large parts of Kobe and Tokyo and other industrial cities were devastated by fire storms. Eight million wooden homes were destroyed and more than 300,000 people killed. Japan was in flames, yet she still refused to surrender.

While the air force had been furiously bombing Japan, scientists at Los Alamos, New Mexico, were completing the Manhattan Project—the testing of the first atomic bomb, which was made possible by the recent discovery of fissionable plutonium and uranium-235. On July 16, 1945, the bomb was exploded at Alamogordo, New Mexico; a quiet white flash followed by the roar of a shaking desert, and then a mushroom cloud soaring seven miles high. A week later at the Potsdam Conference, Japan was presented with an ultimatum: surrender or suffer “prompt and utter destruction.” Although the Japanese emperor may have wanted to capitulate, as did most Japanese, some military officers thought surrender dishonorable, and government officials ignored the Potsdam ultimatum while making peace overtures to Switzerland and Russia. At the orders of President Truman, on August 6, a single B-29 dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and three days later a second bomb fell on Nagasaki. The crew on the Hiroshima raid felt the painful flash of light and the shock wave of air turbulence, and then they saw a towering mushroom of fire and smoke that rose 10,000 feet per minute. No one wanted to imagine the inferno below. Most of the city vanished and close to 100,000 people died instantly.

Truman’s decision to use the atomic bomb has been the subject of intense and endless controversy. Truman himself, noting that Japan called for a cease-fire a week after Hiroshima (an official surrender was signed in September), defended his decision on the grounds that it saved the lives of half a million American soldiers who would have been killed in the invasion of the mainland. Every GI in the Pacific was relieved to hear about the bomb, now knowing the war would end and that they had survived it. Because of the heavy resistance with which Japan defended Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and Tarawa, battles in which some 50,000 American soldiers died, it seems likely that an invasion would have meant a prolonged and bloody war in which the Japanese and Americans would have suffered far more casualties than the lives lost at Hiroshima. The kamikaze attacks had impressed upon Americans an image of Japanese soldiers as death-defying fanatics; it could not be ignored that less than five percent of Japanese fighting men had ever surrendered in any one battle. Military experts estimated that an invasion of Japan would be more risky and dangerous than the Normandy landing.

Still, was there no alternative? Critics argued that Truman should have ordered a demonstration explosion off the coast of Japan. That proposal was rejected on the grounds that a duh bomb may have only
stiffened Japan's resistance, or that the plane carrying the bomb could easily be shot down, or that Japanese militarists who wanted to pursue the war would suppress news of the bomb. Some critics also argue that the dropping of a second bomb on Nagasaki was unnecessary since the two days that had passed did not allow the Japanese government time to reach a decision. But later, a close study of Japan's chiefs of staff and war minister revealed that following Hiroshima they were already speculating that America had only one bomb and thus the war could continue. Any prospect of a negotiated peace acceptable to Japan had been precluded by the American policy, adopted earlier against Germany, of unconditional surrender.

Many scientists who built the bomb did not anticipate its use against Japan. Most of the physicists who worked on the Manhattan Project, many of whom were refugees who had fled European fascism, assumed that they were in a race with Hitler, as did Albert Einstein when he informed President Roosevelt that Germany was developing an atom bomb. When England proved helpless to defend herself against the Third Reich's V-2 rockets, American scientists grew more apprehensive about the possibility of German scientists developing supersonic weapons with nuclear warheads. After Germany had been invaded and her scientific laboratories examined, investigators concluded that there was no evidence that the Nazis had successfully developed the bomb (although they would have, if some German physicists had not obstructed the effort and who were later appalled to read that America would use such a weapon). With the defeat of Germany there was no military need to continue developing the bomb, but the momentum and intellectual excitement of cracking the secrets of nature compelled American physicists to proceed. What scientists discover can seldom be ignored. Once international scientific circles learned that the power locked in an atom equals its mass multiplied by the speed of light squared, the genie was out of the bottle. After the Los Alamos explosion a private poll was conducted of the scientists who had worked on the bomb at the Chicago-based Manhattan Project. Forty-six percent supported a proposal for a demonstration explosion off the waters of Japan, and another 25 percent favored a demonstration in the United States in the presence of Japanese observers. A number of scientists also sent a petition to President Truman warning against using the bomb until Japan had sufficient time to surrender. Yet some of the leading scientists close to the president, such as James B. Conant and Vannevar Bush, approved of Hiroshima as a target, as did J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the Manhattan Project, who soon afterwards anguished about his decision, reminding his colleagues that physicists now had to recognize that they "have known sin."

Then, as now, some believed that the bomb was immoral because of the vast death and suffering it wrought, and there are those who, pointing to the even greater devastation of Tokyo and Dresden, insist that mass terror of civilian populations was a foregone conclusion. If a few Americans felt guilt, many more felt revenge, arguing that without Pearl Harbor there would have been no Hiroshima. According to the polls, 75 percent of Americans approved of Truman's decision, seeing the bomb as the bringer of peace. Some realized the implications of the weapon and felt the primal fear of annihilation. Soon, with the outbreak of the cold war, the bomb became the possible instrument of universal extinction and Americans wondered how they would live with it, as though civilization had inherited an incurable disease.

But the victorious ending of the Second World War resulted in no joyous celebration but somber reflection. On V-J Day, August 14, 1945, America turned into a saturnalia. In cities across the nation traffic came to a halt as people danced in the streets. Strangers toasted one another and, to the delightful roar of crowds, sailors grabbed and kissed passing and willing young women. Americans had good reason to rejoice.