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By Herbert P. Bix

A producer for the Korean Broadcasting System, which is doing a special program commemorating August 15, 1945, recently asked me why Japan's ruling elites rejected the Potsdam Declaration. "What issue most impeded their decision to surrender?" he inquired. "Shouldn't they have cared more for the safety of their own people after the war had long been irrevocably lost? Wasn't the U.S. nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the real reason they finally surrendered?"

What the Japanese people in summer 1945 called "the government" meant Prime Minister Suzuki Kantaro and his cabinet ministers, who headed ministries that were rent with antagonistic factions. The "ruling elites," denoted primarily the Court Group around Emperor Hirohito plus the participants in the Supreme War Leadership Council, the first group to formally discuss the Potsdam Declaration. The Army and Navy Ministers and Chiefs of Staff, and others who took part in the emperor's last two imperial conferences or who influenced the final outcome, also comprised the core ruling elite. Former prime minister Prince Konoe Fumimaro, former foreign minister Shigemitsu Mamoru, the emperor's brother, Prince Takamatsu, and their respective secretaries and advisers all fell into this category. So too did Admiral Takagi Sokichi, an adviser to Konoe and Takamatsu.

These people had many reasons to bring the lost war to an end short of Japan's further destruction and unconditional capitulation to the Anglo-Americans. But only the emperor had the sovereign power to resolve the issue. And during the entire month of June and well into July, when U.S. terror bombing of Japanese civilian targets peaked, he resisted and showed no determination to do so.

It is also true that with the exception of Konoe, no one in the government or even the Court Group ever proposed opening direct negotiations with Washington, though most of them knew that the acting U.S. Secretary of State in summer 1945 was Joseph C. Grew, the former ambassador in Tokyo, a man sympathetic to the emperor and the "moderates" around the throne. Instead, they placed their hopes on ending the war on the good offices of Moscow, despite knowing that Stalin could not be trusted.

Emperor Hirohito and his chief political adviser, Kido Koichi, stuck with the militarists and insisted on continuing with preparations for final battles on the home islands even in late June, when all organized resistance on Okinawa had ended, and an estimated 120,000 Japanese combatants (including Koreans and Taiwanese) and 150,000 to 170,000 non-combatants lay dead. U.S. combat losses in the battle of Okinawa were approximately 12,520 killed and over 33,000 wounded. With time accelerating and their sense of the urgency of the situation deepening, Hirohito responded to this defeat by forcing the army and navy leaders to agree to the idea of an "early peace." But he still gave no indication that he was thinking in terms of an immediate surrender, let alone proposing peace to the nations he was actually fighting.

Into the month of July, the leaders of the imperial armed forces clung to the idea that as Allied lines of supply and communication lengthened, their own forces would do better on the homeland battlefields. But by this time Japan had virtually no oil, its cities were in ruins and its navy and naval air capability virtually non-existent. It is unclear at what point Hirohito abandoned the illusion that his armed forces remained capable of delivering at least one devastating blow to the enemy so that his diplomats could negotiate a surrender on face saving terms. But six months of intensive U.S. terror bombing of the Japanese civilian population had forced him, the Court group, and the government to take into account not only their huge losses of men and materials, but also food shortages and the growing war-weariness of the Japanese people. How could they lead and preserve their system of rule after peace returned?

That question weighed on their minds when the Potsdam Declaration arrived (July 27-28), calling on them to surrender unconditionally or face immediate destruction. Yet they rejected the four-power ultimatum, feeling as former prime minister and navy "moderate," Admiral Yonai Mitsumasa, said to his secretary on July 28, "There is no need to rush."

Domestic political considerations drove Japan's decision-makers. Ultimately, what mattered most was where each of them, and the institutions they represented, stood as a result of an unconditional surrender.

Hirohito, counting on the success of the Foreign Ministry's peace overtures to Moscow, resisted facing reality and never acted resolutely. But many months after their surrender, Hirohito, Kido, and Foreign Minister Togo Shigenori placed all blame on the military and claimed that they had been forced to reject the Potsdam terms because they feared precipitating a military coup d'etat which would have threatened their lives and brought about a worse situation than the one they confronted. They were clearly dissembling. What they had really feared was the destruction of their entire framework for rule.

After the Suzuki government rejected Potsdam, Hirohito waited to hear from Stalin. He worried about defending the tokens of his legitimacy -- the three "imperial regalia" -- and lost the chance to end the war before the Soviets entered it. But some cabinet ministers and members of a cabinet advisory committee, composed largely of the leaders of big business, revisited the Potsdam Declaration, arguing that it had been a

mistake to postpone acceptance of its terms. Prime Minister Suzuki, however, ignored their advice because the emperor and the army were not on board. By July, sixty-four Japanese cities had been largely or partially destroyed by conventional bombs and millions of pounds of incendiaries. There was little left to be destroyed: the crisis abroad and at home had merged.

At this moment, with the war all but over, the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on the civilian center of Hiroshima; the Soviet Union entered the war; and the U.S. dropped a second atomic bomb on the civilian center of Nagasaki. Truman and Byrnes introduced nuclear weapons into modern warfare when it had been militarily unnecessary to do so. Washington has believed ever since that the atomic bomb decisively forced Japan's surrender. But the Soviet factor carried greater weight in the eyes of the emperor and most military leaders. For surrender to the Soviet Union would surely have doomed the monarchy, whereas the Potsdam Declaration, which Truman had deliberately prevented Stalin from signing, held out the slim possibility of maintaining it.

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So we come to the question of ideology, or the national polity and essence, which they called kokutai. During the 1930s, when many Japanese had private doubts about the monarchy, right-wingers and ultra-nationalists used this amuletic word as a weapon for attacking their opponents. Their object was to reorganize the state, stamp out criticism of the military, and silence liberals and socialists. Most Japanese did not know what kokutai meant, though the term had had a legal content ever since 1925. But "kokutai clarification campaigns" intimidated people and instilled a sense of crisis such that no one dared to publicly question the emperor's rescripts on national affairs: they were sacred and inviolable just as he was.

With defeat imminent, Japan's leaders feared that without the imperial house, the state and their own power would be devalued and diminished in the eyes of the people, and that the state would ultimately disintegrate. Thus for them, the kokutai was always more than a mere slogan for unifying the nation. It was the mission worth making the people fight to the death. The army and navy ministers and chiefs of staff in August 1945 equated kokutai with the emperor's right of supreme command, the mechanism by which they controlled the armed forces. But for all who participated in the last imperial conferences that produced the surrender decision, kokutai meant a sovereign, politically empowered monarchy based on the orthodox State Shinto view of the state, in which the people existed to assist the imperial destiny. For Hirohito, kokutai meant not only preservation of the dynasty but his own continuation on the throne.

Japanese leaders still had to decide whether they wanted to make an immediate decision to surrender under the circumstances. Governments that start or end wars of aggression characteristically care little for the safety of their own people. What they place first are their own interests and their own "mission." When their policies prove calamitous and their wars become unwinnable, they look for ways to absolve themselves and shift blame onto others.

In waging and losing the Vietnam war, Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon never once placed the interests of the American or Vietnamese people first. Today, in the era of inevitable U.S. defeat in Iraq, the highest U.S. officials who foisted the war on the American people face a similar situation. The Bushites, "neoconservatives," and Pentagon generals who urge Americans to continue their illegal war and occupation of Iraq until "we win," are looking out for their own political interests and preparing for the political struggle that lies ahead.

So it was with Japan's decision-makers trying to end their war of aggression while their subjects faced the real prospect of physical annihilation. Preserving their conservative system of rule with the emperor at the apex was their ultimate end; war termination their political means.

If we remove what was specific to Japan from this sketch of war termination in 1945, then we see that their desire to accept defeat in a way that would obfuscate their own war responsibility and allow them to stay in control was hardly unique. Leaders of an imperialist state in the process of going down to defeat in war invariably behave this way.

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We may never know the actual thinking of Hirohito when he decided to surrender. General MacArthur would not allow him to be questioned. But Kido gave extensive depositions to the interrogators of the International Prosecution Section of GHQ, which wrote the scenario for the Tokyo Tribunal in accordance with Truman administration policy. In those depositions he said the emperor surrendered in order to bring the war to an end and save human lives. He and the other top leaders figured that the new U.S. weapon of mass destruction, the atomic bomb, had given them a face-saving excuse -- a way to accept defeat that would enable them to lead the nation through the immediate post-surrender situation.

Hirohito said something similar in 1946 in the "Monologue" that he dictated to his palace entourage. But what chiefly motivated him to "bow to the inevitable" and "bear the unbearable" was his desire to save a politically empowered throne with himself on it. If the military posed no threat to the imperial house, the people did. If he did not act immediately with the Russians bearing down on Japan and the national capacity for protracted resistance nearly exhausted, the monarchy, which he equated with the state, would be destroyed.

The atomic bombs and the Soviet invasion gave Japanese decision-makers a good justification for ending the war. But if they were to control the immediate postwar situation, the surrender had to be very carefully choreographed. In the early morning hours of August 10 they made their decision and over the next four days crafted the myth that the emperor had saved the nation by his heroic intervention in favor of peace.

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Hirohito's imperial rescript accepting the Potsdam Declaration was recorded and broadcast by radio on August 15. It was a masterpiece of propaganda packed with terms like "preservation of the national polity," "subjects of the empire," and the "indestructibility of the divine land." The ideologues who drafted it deliberately obfuscated the Allies harsh terms of surrender because national pride was at stake. They avoided words that connoted dishonor like "surrender" and "defeat," and used instead the neutral term "end of the war" (shusen).

The surrender rescript was the very first Japanese government attempt to simultaneously reaffirm wartime categories of thought, redefine Hirohito's national image as a pacifist and antimilitarist, and lay the basis for the later argument that the entire nation should repent. With everything at stake, he stepped forward live, as it were, in the form of a recorded message, speaking directly to the Japanese people in their worst moment of pain. This was the first time he had deliberately addressed the entire nation, though his voice had been broadcast inadvertently once before, in 1928.

Especially memorable to many Japanese was the emperor's expression of "profound solicitude" for "those who fell on the fields of battle" "or those who met with untimely death and all their bereaved families." He promised the Japanese people that his "sacred decision" (seidan) would open the way for "a grand peace for all the generations to come by enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable." And he ended with an admonishment to "continue as one family from generation to generation, ever firm in its faith of the imperishableness of its divine land, and mindful of the heavy burden of responsibilities, and the long road before it." "Unite . . . for the future;" and "work with resolution so as ye may enhance the innate glory of the Imperial State."

Hirohito's language helped to transform him from a war to a peace leader, from a cold, aloof monarch to a human being who cared for his people. No wonder that the mystique of the throne, albeit diminished by defeat, carried over into the post-surrender period! But give credit also to the journalists, radio announcers, and government officials who interpreted the sacred, high-pitched "voice of the jewel" (gyokuon). These spin masters, hammering home the message that the emperor mourned for his subjects, played a crucial a role in crafting the myths of the emperor as pacifist and the lost war as a legitimate, unavoidable war for self-defense, self-preservation, and the "liberation of Asia."

The problem of historical consciousness that today clouds Japan's relations with Asian neighbors began with the emperor's surrender rescript. Enjoining the Japanese people to adapt to the new situation, it left them no room to clarify their leaders' responsibility for repressing their speech and making them fight a reckless war.

For essentially selfish reasons of state, Truman and MacArthur treated Hirohito as leniently as they did many other institutions that had promoted war, such as the Yasukuni Shrine. A truthful, public post-mortem on both Hirohito's "green light" for war in 1941 and his true role in the surrender process was never conducted. Grateful to Washington and GHQ for protecting Hirohito and preserving the monarchy, Japan's ruling elites never demanded that the U.S. apologize or show contrition for Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Time magazine's cover hinted at the debate over the future of the monarchy and Hirohito

The historical issues that complicate Japan's relations with its Asian neighbors began with the surrender and continued during and after the occupation. Present from the start has been the still unresolved question of the emperor, the August 15 rescript, and how to handle the war dead, symbolized by today's Yasukuni Shrine problem.

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