

Emperor Hirohito's New Clothes

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Was Hirohito the pacifist of the Pacific War? In trying to answer this question after Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, the U.S. found itself in a double bind. On the one hand, since Hirohito had been portrayed up to that point as a militant, the prevailing sentiment in America was to hold the emperor accountable; a month after the surrender, the Senate, for its part, introduced a resolution by unanimous consent asking President Truman to arrest Hirohito. On the other hand, prosecuting the divine leader of Japan risked further bloodshed and threatened the chance for a peaceful transition. In 1946, the U.S. declared its official position: led by chief war crimes prosecutor Joseph Keenan, U.S. officials announced that Hirohito would be exempt from prosecution as a war criminal.¹ In addition, the U.S. allowed him to remain emperor, a title he kept until his passing on January 7, 1989. Eventually, as part of the complete remaking of his image, the post-war world came to regard Hirohito as a pacifist; his designated posthumous name, Shōwa, means "Bright Peace." Rather than sealing his legacy, however, his death has renewed an old debate: was America's strategy to exonerate Hirohito justified? While some might point to Hirohito's constitutional authority over the military and the putative cover-up after the war as indications of his guilt, the evidence does not prove Hirohito's guilt, but rather suggests that the emperor ruled at the mercy of his military commanders. Either way, the U.S. made the right call absolving Hirohito since the emperor's exoneration benefitted U.S. interests by enabling a smoother transition during the occupation of Japan and setting the stage for a prosperous, peaceful future between the two nations in the ensuing decades.

Some contend that the emperor was ultimately accountable because he held legal authority over Japan during the war. Until May 2, 1947, Hirohito ruled under the Meiji Constitution, which was established on February 11, 1889 and granted supreme power to the emperor.² According to Article 11 of the Constitution, "the Emperor has the supreme command of the Army and Navy."³ This declaration suggests that Hirohito had ultimate responsibility over the military during the Pacific War. This detail wasn't lost on American leaders. During his Congressional testimony on September 18, 1945, Georgia Senator Richard Russell cited Article 11 to make the claim that a "failure to put the Emperor on trial would be a tragic mistake. Hirohito is the head and heart of Japanese imperialism."⁴ In Senator Russell's view, constitutional authority alone sufficed to establish Hirohito's guilt. Even the emperor himself appears to have shared that view. In his 2007 scholarly article published in *Diplomatic History* entitled "Emperor Hirohito and Japan's Decision to Go to War with the United States: Reexamined," Washington State University history professor Noriko Kawamura cites a recent discovery of Hirohito's letter, drafted in the aftermath of the surrender, in which the emperor expresses "'a deep responsibility' for the tragic

¹ *The New York Times*. "No Hirohito Trial, Keenan Says." June 18, 1946. Accessed April 22, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/1946/06/18/archives/no-hirohito-trial-says-keenan-first-witness-called-in-tokyo-no.html>.

² Japan. "The Constitution of the Empire of Japan." February 11, 1889.

³ Japan.

⁴ *Hearings*, 91st Cong. (1945) (statement of Senator Richard Russell of Georgia). <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1945-pt7/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1945-pt7-6-1.pdf>.

outcome of the war and felt sorry for ‘his lack of virtue.’”⁵ That Hirohito felt responsible for the war shows that he felt he had the power to influence the proceedings of the conflict, but didn’t do enough to avert the eventual “tragic outcome.” On the other hand, Kawamura notes that in reality, “Japan's prewar decision-making process under the Meiji Constitution was pluralistic and consensus oriented” and that despite Hirohito’s personal opposition to the war, his “influence was limited and could not reverse the war decision unanimously reached by the military and the Tojo cabinet.”⁶ Kawamura portrays Hirohito more as a figurehead than a ruler. To that point, in his telegram to the War Department on January 25, 1946, General Douglas MacArthur states, “I have gained the definite impression from as complete a research as was possible to me that his connection with affairs of state up to the time of the end of the war was largely ministerial and automatically responsive to the advice of his counsellors [sic].”⁷ At the time, MacArthur was the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers and presided over the occupation of Japan. As such, his findings proved pivotal in swaying the American opinion of Hirohito’s role in the war towards innocence. Buttressing this favorable view of the emperor was a 1947 report written by Brigadier General Bonner Fellers. In his report for *Foreign Service* titled “Hirohito's Struggle to Surrender,” Fellers states, “Was Hirohito always a pacifist who had been made a tool of the fanatic militarists without means of fighting back? I left Japan convinced that he was.”⁸ Fellers worked for MacArthur and served as a liaison between the occupation regime and the imperial household. That intermediary role lended extra weight to Fellers’ testimony. Countering earlier wartime perception, the U.S. became sympathetic to the complexities of circumstance, concluding that the emperor was a pacifist who could not contain the militant factions within his own government.

Some people argue that this pacifist image of Hirohito was to some extent a contrivance built on suppression of documents implicating the emperor in the war. For example, in his 1992 article in *Journal of Japanese Studies* titled “The Showa Emperor’s ‘Monologue’ and the Problem of War Responsibility,” historian Herbert Bix notes that “top-secret wartime records of the leaders in Japan were either deliberately destroyed in the weeks before General MacArthur's arrival, or else falsified or hidden, leaving wartime memoirs and oral testimony by loyalist officials as the main basis on which the Allies could prosecute war criminals.”⁹ This finding suggests an effort among Japanese loyalists to protect Hirohito from prosecution. That said, evidence of sanitization of historical records is not a sufficient condition to prosecute the emperor. More problematic is an accusation made by the Soviets. A USSR note sent to the U.S. Secretary of State during the early days of the Cold War asserts that “it was proved by facts established at the court trial at Khabarovsk that a leading role in the preparation and realization of bacteriological warfare belonged not only to the already convicted Japanese war criminals but also to the Emperor of

⁵ Kawamura, Noriko. "Emperor Hirohito and Japan's Decision to Go to War with the United States: Reexamined." *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 1 (January 2007): 51-79. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24916020>.

⁶ Kawamura, 52.

⁷ MacArthur, Douglas. Telegram to War Department, telegram, January 1946. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v08/d308>.

⁸ Fellers, Bonner F. "Hirohito's Struggle to Surrender." *Foreign Service*, July 1947. https://bonnerfellers.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/B.Fellers_Hirohitos_Struggle_to_Surrender_Foreign_Service_July_1947.pdf.

⁹ Bix, Herbert P. "The Showa Emperor's 'Monologue' and the Problem of War Responsibility." *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 295-363. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/132824>.

Japan, Hirohito.”¹⁰ The use of biological weapons violates the Geneva Conventions and would have constituted a war crime, and the USSR’s declaration appears to undermine the U.S.’s decision to exonerate Hirohito. Countering this view, however, is University of Otago professor Jing-Bao Nie. In his 2005 article titled “The West’s Dismissal of the Khabarovsk trial as ‘Communist Propaganda’: Ideology, evidence and international bioethics” in the *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, Nie notes that “There were many problems and shortcomings associated with the operation of the Khabarovsk trial itself. [...] For instance, international participation was deliberately excluded by the careful choice of the trial’s location - in a remote city.”¹¹ Nie conveys a skeptical view on the lack of transparency regarding the Khabarovsk trial. That view was shared by U.S. authorities. Nie notes that the Soviet attempt to disseminate the findings of the Khabarovsk trial was dismissed by the U.S. “as an exercise in communist propaganda.”¹² Given the expected Soviet motivation to undermine the U.S. occupation of Japan, the prior record of Stalin’s show trials, and the lack of transparency needed for international tribunals, it was justifiable for the U.S. to characterize the trials’ findings as disinformation. To this day, there is no evidence independently verified by international courts that Hirohito gave direct orders amounting to war crimes.

From a strategic perspective, the emperor’s exoneration benefitted U.S. interests by providing a smoother post-war transition for Japan. As noted in another article of his from 1995 article titled “Inventing the ‘Symbol Monarchy’ in Japan, 1945-52” in the *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Bix notes that “the Allied Supreme Commander would use the emperor, and the emperor would cooperate in being used. Their relationship became one of expediency.”¹³ The quote suggests that the emperor’s exoneration served a greater purpose for America. For his part, MacArthur recognized that prosecuting the emperor would “unquestionably cause a tremendous convulsion among the Japanese people, the repercussions of which cannot be overestimated. He is a symbol which unites all Japanese. Destroy him and the nation will disintegrate.”¹⁴ MacArthur was aware that he had to win over the Japanese people in order for a successful post-war path to take shape for both nations. Meanwhile, the Japanese were not shy about expressing what could win them over. In a December 16, 1945 letter addressed to MacArthur, Takemoto Rihei, a Japanese citizen from the Nara Prefecture, summed up what many of his countrymen were feeling: “The emperor is our life. We cannot live without the emperor. Please do not make His Majesty suffer. This is the ultimate and most earnest request of the Japanese people.”¹⁵ That sentiment offered a way for the occupying forces to win the trust of the people of Japan: retaining the emperor. Thus, both America and Japan would benefit from preserving Hirohito’s position. This alignment informed policy. As noted in his 2006 article titled “Who Saved the Emperor?” in *Pacific Historical*

¹⁰ USSR. Letter to U.S. Secretary of State, "USSR Charged Emperor Hirohito, Shiro Ishii, Masajo Kitano, Yujiro Wakamatsu, and Yukio Kasahara with War Crimes.," n.d. <https://www.archives.gov/files/iwg/japanese-war-crimes/select-documents.pdf>.

¹¹ Nie, Jing-Bao. "The West's Dismissal of the Khabarovsk Trial as 'Communist Propaganda': Ideology, Evidence and International Bioethics." *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 1 (2004): 32-42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02448905>.

¹² Nie, 32.

¹³ Bix, Herbert P. "Inventing the 'Symbol Monarchy' in Japan, 1945-52." *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 319-363. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/133011>.

¹⁴ MacArthur.

¹⁵ Rihei, Takemoto. Letter to General Douglas MacArthur, December 16, 1945.

Review, Johns Hopkins history professor Hal Brands notes that “the exigencies of the occupation highlighted the attractiveness of this ‘retentionist’ viewpoint and forced President Harry Truman and the State Department to codify and translate these ideas into policy.”¹⁶ It is evident that the demands of America’s post-war strategy became a driving force in dictating policy regarding Hirohito’s fate. One of those strategic considerations was the emerging Cold War. In his 2014 article titled “Psychological Warfare during the American Occupation of Japan: The Documentary Film Project of Shu Taguchi and Bonner Fellers, 1949–1951” in *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, professor Haruo Iguchi notes that some factions of the U.S. government wanted to have “the emperor continue to reign in Japan as a bulwark against Communism.”¹⁷ At the time, since America saw a global Communist takeover as the new emerging threat, nurturing Japan to be a democratic ally was very much in the U.S.’s interests. In that context, the emperor who had been used to some extent as a pawn by his own handlers had become a new chess piece for America.

In the long view, the dividends of peace and prosperity that materialized in Japan during the back half of the 20th century attest to the prudence of U.S.’s decision to exonerate the emperor. When Hirohito visited Anchorage, Alaska on September 26, 1971, becoming the first reigning Japanese emperor to step on foreign soil, he did so in an ambassadorial role; on that day, President Richard Nixon remarked that the two nations had “built a structure of political, economic, and cultural ties which spans the space between our two countries” and wished that they would continue to “work together in friendship for peace and prosperity for the Pacific and for all people in the world.”¹⁸ Such lofty rhetoric between former rivals could hardly have been foreseen by the architects of Hirohito’s exoneration just two decades earlier. Once bitter enemies, the two nations had become close allies. In his 2004 article in *Asian Perspective* titled “The Peace System in Critical Situations in Post-War and Current Japan: Conflict, Reparations, and the Constitution,” political scientist Setsuko Onoda states that by 1990 “laws made it possible for the Japanese Self- Defense Forces (SDF) to assist U.S. military actions.”¹⁹ These legal actions made it clear that Japan had turned from America’s foe into a friend. Meanwhile, the nation that America helped transition thrived economically during the post-war period, with Hirohito at the helm. Onoda further writes: “Budget resources that until that point had been earmarked for military ends were instead re-funneled into the advancement of the private-sector economy.”²⁰ Protecting the international community from Japan’s militarism has been beneficial to the people of Japan as well. The extent of America and Japan’s mutually beneficial relationship was characterized by Mike Mansfield, a former U.S. Ambassador to Japan, as follows: in his 1989 article “The U.S.

¹⁶ Brands, Hal. "Who Saved the Emperor?" *Pacific Historical Review* 75, no. 2 (May 2006): 271-305. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/phr.2006.75.2.271>.

¹⁷ Iguchi, Haruo. "Psychological Warfare during the American Occupation of Japan: The Documentary Film Project of Shu Taguchi and Bonner Fellers, 1949–1951." *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, no. 25 (2014). Accessed April 25, 2022. http://www.jaas.gr.jp/jjas/PDF/2014/03_Iguchi.pdf.

¹⁸ Nixon, Richard M. "Remarks of Welcome to Emperor Hirohito of Japan." Address presented in Anchorage, AK, September 26, 1971. The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-welcome-emperor-hirohito-japan-anchorage-alaska>.

¹⁹ Onoda, Setsuko. "The Peace System in Critical Situations in Post-war and Current Japan: Conflict, Reparations, and the Constitution." *Asian Perspective* 28, no. 2 (2004): 233-61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704459>.

²⁰ Onoda, 242.

and Japan: Sharing Our Destinies” in *Foreign Affairs*, Mansfield states, “This relationship is of immense benefit to the peoples of both nations. The United States enjoys the support of a strong, loyal and democratic ally in the Pacific, which contributes greatly to regional peace and prosperity. Japan has the protection of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and enjoys great access to the U.S. market, the world's largest.”²¹ America’s conciliatory approach with Hirohito set the stage for economic and geopolitical cooperation that benefited both nations tremendously in the ensuing decades.

Seen through the wider lens of 20th century history, the weight of evidence suggests that the U.S. decision to exonerate Hirohito, rendered during the fog of peace that followed the fog of war, was justified. In the immediacy, this determination helped buoy relations with Japan during what could have been a contentious occupation period. In the long run, the emperor’s unblemished record as a post-war peacekeeper, Japan’s economic ascension, and the nation’s close alliance with the U.S. remain visible dividends of the decision. All this could not have been possible without Hirohito’s compliance. To some extent, as MacArthur and Fellers noted, Japanese emperors have long been little more than agents of a powerful administrative state. For centuries, the daily activities of Japanese emperors—including what clothes they should wear—have been closely managed by what is now called the Imperial Household Agency.²² In that sense, just as the Pacific War is an oxymoron that means “peaceful war,” Hirohito himself was a self-contradiction: a king who served as a pawn in a bigger game. This is not a truth that could have been easily told in official channels at the time. But like the child who said the quiet part out loud that the officials couldn’t say in the parable “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” historians would soon tell the story of Hirohito as a figurehead that served American interests.²³ Yet is even this truth true? To the contrary, if a historian were to reconsider the events through an even larger, more forgiving frame, that Hirohito was willing to play his part in the transformation of his own image, as part of the transformation of the nation he loved into a modern economic power—all the while preserving the world’s longest-running imperial line—reveals a man perhaps far more in command of his fate, and the fate of his nation, than initially meets the eye. In the eyes of historical hindsight, Hirohito may have played his role absolutely divinely.

²¹ Mansfield, Mike. "The U.S. and Japan: Sharing Our Destinies." *Foreign Affairs* 68, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 3-15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20043898>.

²² Bix, 328. “Inventing the 'Symbol Monarchy'”

²³ Andersen, Hans Christian. "The Emperor's New Clothes." 1837. In *Fairy Tales*, edited by Jackie Wullschlager. Translated by Tiina Nunnally. N.p., 2005.

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