

Dakota Vasco

*A Velvet Glove and a Big Stick:  
General Douglas MacArthur, Emperor Hirohito,  
and State-Building in Japan (1945-1952)*

ABSTRACT: *This essay examines the mindset (Kokutai) and actions of Imperial Japan before, during, and after World War II and how they relate to the country's post-war occupation period under the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (S.C.A.P.), General Douglas MacArthur. An analysis of personal journals, military statistics, and witness accounts suggests that occupation was a success story and remains remarkable to this day.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; World War II; Japan; U.S.; Douglas MacArthur; Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito); Kokutai; post-war occupation; Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (S.C.A.P.); Far East Commission (F.E.C.)*

*Introduction*

The relationship between Japan and the United States of America is an intriguing geopolitical phenomenon. That these two economic giants have been enjoying such a strong partnership—despite their tumultuous history—remains an enduring legacy of diplomacy and mutual need. This is especially noteworthy from Japan's perspective, considering the robust tradition of U.S. aggression toward Japanese sovereignty, from Admiral Matthew C. Perry's forced opening of the secluded nation in 1853-1854, via the embargo against Imperial Japan just before World War II and the eventual detonation of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the nation's U.S. occupation after its 1945 surrender. Viewing these events without context might lead to the conclusion that the United States and Japan should be bitter archrivals, yet quite the opposite is true. The reason for this unexpected outcome—and simultaneously the topic of this essay—is General Douglas MacArthur's careful attention to Japan's government during its post-war occupation. As a result, Japan's *Kokutai* was spared, preserved, and re-shaped to ensure the country's future stability once the occupation forces had left.

*I. Pre-War Context*

One should consider Imperial Japan and modern Japan as completely different entities, at least in terms of their respective mainstream culture. The term *Kokutai* is often defined as a concept that represents the culture, spirit, and sovereignty of Japan, usually revolving around the divinity and sovereignty of the emperor. While such a definition of *Kokutai* is rather general and does not cover its nuances or ideological contexts, as the concept changes over time according to the ideals of the populace, it is suitable for the purposes of this essay. Accordingly, the "spirit" of Imperial Japan was one of ultra-nationalism, militarism, and superiority over a self-declared "sphere of influence" in East and Southeast Asia. This is how *Kokutai* was commonly understood and used by Emperor Hirohito and the men who surrounded him, and this is how it was summed up in the patriotic pre-war song,

“One Hundred Million Souls for the Emperor,” with its upfront message of what Japanese leaders expected from the common people,<sup>1</sup> namely, self-sacrifice. Based on grand notions of superiority, nationalism, and militarism, Imperial Japan justified its aggressive behavior in China, Manchuria, Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines by claiming that such acts served “to establish a solid basis for the nation’s self-existence and self-defense.”<sup>2</sup> This type of reasoning was not new and, in fact, relatively similar to the justification used by Japan’s ally, Nazi Germany, which also claimed to be threatened by imperial, political, and cultural domination from a burgeoning superpower to the east, the Soviet Union. There was also a lingering sense of resentment, as Japan felt it had been denied certain Pacific and Asian territories that it viewed as its own as spoils of World War I. And then there was Japan’s lack of natural resources.<sup>3</sup> Hirohito was personally torn between his desire for world peace and his realization that Japan’s sovereignty and self-sufficiency could not be fully realized without conquest.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this predicament, one he faced in particular during the 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the emperor—as supreme commander of the Japanese military—had the authority under the 1889 Meiji Constitution to declare and wage war.<sup>5</sup> As emperor, he was also the official head of the state religion—Shintoism—which held that he was a divine being; therefore, he was believed to be entitled to the self-sacrifice of his people, a notion that was exploited extensively when Japan prepared itself for its national defense.<sup>6</sup> The idolizing of the emperor was used to justify Japan’s military expeditions in East Asia and ultimately helped to prolong the war by boosting soldiers’ morale. The Japanese state, its military, and its people viewed conquest as “purifying Asia from the polluting influences of Anglo-American political culture,” a notion that resembles America’s idealistic rhetoric of “Manifest Destiny.”<sup>7</sup> Yet despite his role as supreme commander of the military, as head of the state religion, and as the sovereign spirit of the nation, Hirohito did not and could not act unilaterally. The Imperial Diet of Japan held most of the institutional political power, and the majority of the emperor’s functions and powers were his by designation of the Diet.<sup>8</sup> In reality, though, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Fussel, *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays* (New York: Summit Books/Ballantine Books, 1988), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 360.

<sup>3</sup> Bix, *Hirohito*, 344.

<sup>4</sup> Bix, *Hirohito*, 289.

<sup>5</sup> John W. Dower, *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, 9-11, Iraq* (New York: W. W. Norton/New Press, 2010; eBook), 2055.

<sup>6</sup> Bix, *Hirohito*, 29; Dower, *Cultures of War*, 2074.

<sup>7</sup> Bix, *Hirohito*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> “The Constitution of the Empire of Japan” (1889), trans. Ito Miyoji, *National Diet Library* (Japan), [online](#), accessed June 15, 2022, articles 4, 5, 6, and 9.

Imperial Diet's influence had waned and shifted toward Hirohito and, by extension, the military.<sup>9</sup>

As for the war itself, Japan's initial strategy was twofold: Nazi Germany's military superiority over Europe would lead to Japan wielding greater control over East Asia; this would be followed by quick and decisive attacks against the United States, crippling the latter's naval capabilities and forcing speedy peace negotiations.<sup>10</sup> One of the Japanese army's main fears was its vulnerability to a Soviet invasion from the north while pushing through China, a fear that was allayed after Hitler's 1941 termination of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Japan's military leadership did not seriously consider the possibility of Germany losing to the Soviets, which is why it shifted its focus toward the Pacific. The Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who had staunchly opposed a war against the United States, realized that the only way Japan could ever hope to prevail against the United States would be a surprise attack against the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor,<sup>11</sup> completely destroying its aircraft carriers, which naval doctrine deemed the most important aspect of a modern fleet, and causing so much carnage to intimidate the U.S. public into opposing war. As Yamamoto explained to the war-hungry Japanese government under Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, failure to succeed in this twofold strategy would lead to major devastation and loss for Japan.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the surprise attack failed to cripple the U.S. fleet—no aircraft carriers were docked at Pearl Harbor that day—and it caused the exact opposite reaction that the Japanese leaders had hoped to attain with the U.S. public, namely, a sentiment of revenge.<sup>13</sup> Japanese leaders knew the United States could produce warships and carriers at a significantly higher rate than Japan, so its attack against Pearl Harbor put the writing of failure on the wall. A successful attack against the U.S. Navy would have afforded Japan nearly complete freedom over the Pacific, allowing it to sweep up territories uncontested. Most importantly, the conquest of such territories would have provided Japan with a robust line of defense, forcing the United States to engage in prolonged island battles, resulting in high U.S. casualty rates and low public support for the war. While Japan's strategy was risky and allowed for next to no margin of error, it was considered feasible and, what is more, necessary. The entire system of governance in Imperial Japan relied on the notion of self-preservation, security, and resources acquired through conquest in East Asia—something that would not be possible if there was any intervention by outside military forces against Japan. The idea that the United States would only

---

<sup>9</sup> "Constitution" (1889), trans. Miyoji, article 11.

<sup>10</sup> Bix, *Hirohito*, 396.

<sup>11</sup> History.com Editors, "Isoroku Yamamoto, Japan's Mastermind of the Pearl Harbor Attack, Is Born," *History*, October 23, 2009, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> History.com Editors, "Isoroku Yamamoto."

<sup>13</sup> N.a., "Pearl Harbor Attack, 7 December 1941, Carrier Locations," *Naval History and Heritage Command*, April 1, 2015, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

be defeated if U.S. public support for the war would diminish due to extensive bloodshed and casualties was almost successful at specific points in the war, as no mother wants her son to die over an island she has never heard of before.

## II. Wartime Bloodshed

The war in the Pacific did not turn in favor of the Allied Powers until the end of 1943 when they began to push the Japanese forces off several major islands and started to converge on Japan's main islands. Many back home in the United States were upset about the casualty ratios of Japanese soldiers to American soldiers, which were not as high as they had once been, ranging from a ratio of 7:1 for Saipan to 2:1 for Okinawa and 1.25:1 for Iwo Jima.<sup>14</sup> Even as the Allied Powers were closing in on Japan, U.S. President Roosevelt and later U.S. President Truman struggled to find enough reserve manpower for a massive invasion of the Japanese homeland. Public outcry in the United States demanded that the longest-serving veterans should be sent home and that combat training should last at least six months before sending soldiers into battle. Meanwhile, according to opinion polls, the U.S. population felt that the war was only halfway over.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Japan's war strategy of focusing on U.S. casualties and attrition rather than victory on the battlefield, particularly in light of the enemy's industrial and manpower capability, seemed to add up. It was this strategy that Emperor Hirohito and his high-ranking officials relied upon for months before their belated surrender.

What ultimately ended the war was the detonation of atomic bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States. While it is counterfactual to speculate how much longer the war might have lasted, how high the casualty numbers might have been, and what the extent of physical destruction might have looked like without the use of these atomic bombs, Japan's war strategy of U.S. casualties and attrition provides context for the use of these bombs. The brutality and awful conditions endured by Allied soldiers provide additional context for the latter's prejudices and hatred toward Japanese soldiers and, by extension, civilians and leaders. All this impacted the U.S. occupation of Japan and its goals for reforming the country.

Ever since Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, two things were accepted as fact by both the Japanese and U.S. militaries: should the war last longer than a year, (a) Japan would never be able to win, and (b) the war would be horrendous and costly in terms of lives lost and resources. While both sides shared these notions, their respective strategic approaches were completely different.

---

<sup>14</sup> Dennis M. Giangreco, *Hell to Pay: Operation Downfall and the Invasion of Japan, 1945-47*, updated and expanded ed. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2017), 98-99. For casualty numbers, see also Spencer Tucker, *Battles That Changed History: An Encyclopedia of World Conflict* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010; ProQuest Ebook Central), 553.

<sup>15</sup> Giangreco, *Hell to Pay*, 101; "Roper/Fortune Survey," November 1944, quoted in Dan Olmsted, "How Long Will the War in the Pacific Last?" *The National WWII Museum, New Orleans*, June 25, 2018, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

Yamamoto understood that the war needed to be quick, especially due to the extensive war-capability gap between the two countries. The Japanese Navy would need to move swiftly to cripple or, better, knock out the relatively equal-powered U.S. Navy. Japan calculated that this would shock the U.S. government, military, and civilian population into accepting peace terms and, hopefully, retreating from Japan's sphere of influence in East Asia. Turning to the American view, Major General Graves B. Erskine of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division stated, albeit with a heavy dose of hindsight:

Victory was never in doubt. Its cost was [...] whether there would be any of us left to dedicate our cemetery at the end, or whether the last Marine would die knocking out the last Japanese gunner.<sup>16</sup>

Despite Erskine's confidence, the outcome of a war is always in doubt. In fact, the second half of his statement illustrates the effect of Japan's strategy on those fighting the war. Even as the Axis war machine was grinding to a halt, Japan's policy of maximum "bloodletting and delay" (*shukketsu* and *jikyū senjutsu*) remained tremendously effective in terms of casualties inflicted,<sup>17</sup> a sentiment Hirohito and his officials propagated up until the day of surrender.<sup>18</sup>

Even as U.S. troops were closing in on Japan in 1945, Hirohito and his military leaders remained convinced that all they needed was one final, conclusive battle. Meanwhile, official Imperial conference records from June 6, 1945, almost exactly two months before Hiroshima, declared the "Basic General Outline on Future War Direction Policy" adopted, and stated that

The United States [...] is confronted with numerous problems; such as, mounting casualties [...], growing war weariness among the people [...]. Should Japan resolutely continue the war and force heavy enemy attrition until the latter part of this year, it may be possible to diminish considerably the enemy's will to continue the war.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Japan was clearly ready to take this war as far as necessary.

### III. Desperate Measures

U.S. intelligence was aware of Japan's grim situation, and some military officials, including Army Air Force Commander George C. Kenney, even believed that Japan was just moments away from surrendering due to its diminished military capabilities.<sup>20</sup> However, such an assessment utterly disregarded Imperial Japan's culture of military spirit (*Kokutai*) which explained why Japan had entered the war and why unconditional surrender was not an option. It could be argued that

---

<sup>16</sup> Giangreco, *Hell to Pay*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Giangreco, *Hell to Pay*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Bix, *Hirohito*, 444-445.

<sup>19</sup> Giangreco, *Hell to Pay*, 27, quoting from Takushiro Hattori, *The Complete History of the Greater East Asia War* ([Tokyo]: [Headquarters, United States Army Forces Far East], [1953-1954]), 289-290.

<sup>20</sup> Gar Alperovitz and Sanho Tree, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 29.

Japan's leaders did not view their people as citizens but, rather, as mere subjects of the emperor and, by extension, the military. The only value placed on them pertained to their loyalty and to their devotion to give their lives for the state.

This does not mean that Japan's entire populace should be seen as harmless victims of an oppressive system. A culture of pride, devotion, brutality, and superiority had to be engrained to engage in the kind of atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers. The hypothetically "innocent" teenager in Tokyo had likely already been indoctrinated with this Imperial culture; he had been raised to view himself as superior to the Chinese, the Koreans, and certainly the U.S. Americans; and he would soon be enlisted as a soldier to go off and kill.

To underscore this notion, consider the lesser-known Japanese "Homeland Defense Strategy," named *Ketsu-Go* or "Decisive Operation," which took effect on April 15, 1945. It was laid out as a last-ditch effort to force the Allies, who were preparing for their invasion, into a horrible, bloody conflict across the mainland islands of Kyushu and Honshu. Consistent with the Japanese leadership's hope for a decisive final battle, it called for approximately 5 million Japanese men, women, teenagers, and the elderly to participate in deadly guerrilla tactics against the invaders.<sup>21</sup> Bamboo spears, firebombs, small arms, and anything capable of killing were given to civilians, along with brief training on how to kill, such as group stabbing practice.<sup>22</sup> If necessary, the entire populace would become the front line. Japanese leaders estimated that 20 million Japanese would die defending their country, all the while hoping that millions of American soldiers would be killed as well.<sup>23</sup> A *People's Handbook of Resistance Combat* was distributed which stipulated that "100 million of us [...] must exterminate them [i.e., the Americans] to protect our native soil and maintain our everlasting empire," followed by detailed fighting techniques.<sup>24</sup> In short, the "entire population of Japan [...] [was] a proper military target [...]. There [were] [...] no civilians in Japan."<sup>25</sup>

This is not mentioned here to justify the killing of civilians at the hands of the Allies through bombing campaigns, invasion, or even the atomic bombs. However, it does explain how and why Hirohito and the militarists around him existed: their power was ultimately based on the obedience and engagement of the people who tolerated and perpetuated this system, even if this was accomplished by means of propaganda, brainwashing, or a state religion. This is why the Allies had such a difficult time obtaining an unconditional surrender: Japan's leaders

---

<sup>21</sup> Giangreco, *Hell to Pay*, 119-165.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 222.

<sup>23</sup> Giangreco, *Hell to Pay*, 232.

<sup>24</sup> Giangreco, *Hell to Pay*, 191, quoting an English translation of Japan's *People's Handbook of Resistance Combat* (April 25, 1945).

<sup>25</sup> Fussel, *Thank God for the Atom Bomb*, 27.

knew that millions would fight until the bitter end, if commanded to do so by his divineness, the emperor. It is also an argument why the post-war occupation strategies under General Douglas MacArthur for reforming a democratized Japan were so impressive: for change to occur from the bottom, the top had to be reformed.

But the Allies first had to win the war. In early 1945, while Nazi Germany was facing certain defeat, Tokyo and other major cities were being firebombed, Stalin was promising a Soviet invasion of Japan by summer, and the Allies were preparing Operations “Coronet” and “Olympic” (i.e., the invasion of Honshu and Kyushu respectively).<sup>26</sup> The situation was grim for Japan, yet its insistence to resist surrender provided the time for a most devastating new weapon to be prepared for deployment against the Japanese nation: the atomic bomb. Its use in World War II remains a controversial topic. There are those who feel that it was unnecessary to resort to such extreme force because there were claims that Japan was close to surrendering.<sup>27</sup> Others argue that the words and actions of Japan’s leaders, such as the *Ketsu-Go* plan, prove that Japan was not “close to surrender” but, in fact, prepared to face whatever the Allies would throw at them. Many U.S. military leaders believed the bomb would shorten the war by months and realized only after Hiroshima its potential to decrease the time until peace dramatically.<sup>28</sup> Those justifying the bomb’s use also cite Japan’s increasingly tumultuous political situation: U.S. leaders feared that continued public suffering would lead to rebellions across the country, making the rebuilding process exponentially more difficult; in fact, the *Ketsu-Go* operation called for a “Home Guard” with the sole responsibility to fight off any internal resistance.<sup>29</sup> Setting this debate aside, the atomic bomb’s destructive capabilities, as experienced by the Japanese, brought the war to an early end. Hirohito grudgingly accepted the Allied surrender terms, hoping that he would keep his divine status due to the vaguely spelled out conditions regarding the emperor in the Potsdam Declaration.<sup>30</sup>

Just days after Hirohito’s surrender speech to the public on August 15, 1945, a rapid cultural shift took place: civilians now saw themselves as victims rather than

---

<sup>26</sup> Alperovitz and Tree, *Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 30, regarding the March 9-10, 1945, Tokyo firebombing; “Agreement Regarding Japan,” in “Yalta Conference Agreement, Declaration of a Liberated Europe,” February 11, 1945, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, National Archives, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022; Giangreco, *Hell to Pay*, 270-272, regarding Operations Olympic and Coronet, which were planned to launch December 1, 1945, and March 1, 1946, respectively.

<sup>27</sup> Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power*, 2<sup>nd</sup> expanded ed. (Pluto Press, 1994), 253.

<sup>28</sup> Michael D. Gordin, *Five Days in August: How World War II Became a Nuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 23.

<sup>29</sup> Giangreco, *Hell to Pay*, 202-203.

<sup>30</sup> Bix, *Hirohito*, 451-452; “Potsdam Declaration: Proclamation Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender, Issued, at Potsdam, July 26, 1945,” *AtomicArchive*, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

perpetrators of the war.<sup>31</sup> Hirohito himself had expressed this sentiment in his speech by claiming that the war had been started to “preserve and stabilize” East Asia, meaning that surrender was only agreed upon due to the United States’ “new and most cruel bomb.”<sup>32</sup> The Japanese use the word *Kyodatsu* (“exhaustion”) to denote the overall broken mindset that many of them had during the post-war period. *Kyodatsu* became emblematic of the *Kasutori* culture whereby alcoholism and severe depression gripped Japan’s population who saw no hope for the future.<sup>33</sup> This nationwide depression and victimization culture was compounded by apprehension over the unknown outcome of the U.S.-led occupation. Initially, the fear of a Soviet-style socialist government that would forcibly erase their *Kokutai* was on the forefront of people’s minds.<sup>34</sup> However, this fear was soon allayed when the Japanese realized that the actions taken by MacArthur were, in fact, intended to preserve their *Kokutai*.

#### IV. Post-War Occupation

After his arrival in Japan to discuss surrender terms, MacArthur quickly recognized that upholding the prestige of the emperor would be essential to ensure the success of any occupation-era reforms. He made a comment in passing when he noticed that Japanese soldiers were only following orders when said orders invoked the emperor as the authority.<sup>35</sup> Upon leaving his first meeting with Hirohito, MacArthur instructed General Bonner F. Fellers to write an official analysis of the relationship between the Japanese people and the emperor. In this analysis, Fellers stated that

to dethrone, or hang, the emperor would cause a tremendous and violent reaction from all Japanese [...] it would be comparable to the crucifixion of Christ to us [...]. An independent Japanese army responsible only to the emperor is a permanent menace to peace [...]. The emperor can be made a force of good and peace provided Japan is totally defeated and the military clique is destroyed.<sup>36</sup>

While U.S. officials knew that Hirohito was not innocent of crimes committed during the war, using him as a vehicle for stable change was more important than

---

<sup>31</sup> Gordon, *Modern History of Japan*, 227-229.

<sup>32</sup> Michinomiya Hirohito, “Imperial Rescript on the Termination of the War,” August 15, 1945, *Air Force Magazine*, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Gordon, *Modern History of Japan*, 229, cites a poetic quote from a black-marketeer: “I drank trying to forget a life that hung suspended like a floating weed.”

<sup>34</sup> Gordon, *Modern History of Japan*, 226. The Japanese people feared radical change from first the Soviets and then the United States. Fears or hopes of revolution never occurred.

<sup>35</sup> Seymour Morris, *Supreme Commander: MacArthur’s Triumph in Japan* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), 32. The event mentioned above occurred just after landing. Witnessing a Japanese general unsuccessfully ordering his men to take pills to fight combat sickness, MacArthur joked to the general that these men, like American G.I.s, would not listen. Like clockwork, the men refused the order until the general stated, “The emperor requests that each soldier take one capsule every four hours.” Only then, every soldier obeyed.

<sup>36</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 79.



punishment. After all, to MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (S.C.A.P.), the Japanese militarists were those who had held the real power and needed to be targeted, separated from Hirohito, and dismantled.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, MacArthur proposed to cast Hirohito as a more accessible figure and allow the Japanese people to see their emperor attend public ceremonies and visit war-torn cities to boost morale and cooperation. The emperor's status would still be purely symbolic, but it would provide the Japanese people with a sense of "spiritual regeneration."<sup>38</sup> Most importantly, it would remove the emperor's militaristic connotation and cause the Japanese people to see him as a purely public figure rather than a military leader. MacArthur noted how accepting Hirohito was regarding these changes and even proposed that his son, Crown Prince Akihito, be tutored by an "American woman of cultural background and maturity."<sup>39</sup> Both men figured that women would be crucial to help erase the militaristic culture of Japanese men, and seeing the crown prince tutored by a mature American woman might set an example.

On January 1, 1946, Hirohito publicly announced that he was not of divine origin, and this was followed by a complete transformation of his appearance. His military uniform was replaced by Western suits, and his traditional Japanese breakfast was replaced by bacon, eggs, and toast. Beyond this, MacArthur sent the emperor to sports events, concerts, and other public functions – all in an effort to humanize the emperor to the Japanese people.<sup>40</sup>

From MacArthur's point of view, turning the emperor into a public civilian figure was merely "step one" on Japan's journey toward democratization and demilitarization. It was the transformation of Japan's government into a liberal democracy where MacArthur truly showcased his brilliance. He realized that the Japanese would never accept reforms forcibly put in place by a foreign occupier. Instead, he used his S.C.A.P. authority to play an advisory role in the Japanese Diet, whereby the bureaucrats would have the authority to formulate their constitution and demilitarize their armed forces.<sup>41</sup> Key aspects of this new constitution included equality by law for all men and women; freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly; academic freedom; freedom to choose and dismiss representatives through voting; unions; establishing the emperor as a purely symbolic figure; and, importantly, the permanent renunciation of war.<sup>42</sup> MacArthur proceeded this way for two reasons: to enable the Japanese to attain a sense of accomplishment and pride in reforming themselves, and to avoid being

---

<sup>37</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 79-81.

<sup>38</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 81.

<sup>40</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 82.

<sup>41</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 87.

<sup>42</sup> "The Constitution of Japan" (1947), [online](#), accessed June 15, 2022, chapters I, II, and III.

seen as a colonizing overlord.<sup>43</sup> His stance caused contention between him and other Allied officials, such as Sir George B. Sansom, who thought the Japanese would never be democratic if allowed to reform their own system and who, instead, called for public displays of military power in cities throughout Japan as an act of dominance.<sup>44</sup>

The inclination toward domination, submission, and punishment was rather popular among Allied leaders, the American people, and members of the Far East Commission (F.E.C.). In a November 1944 Gallup Poll, 13% of respondents stated that they wished to see every single Japanese exterminated,<sup>45</sup> and the *New York Times* even ran articles on whether this could realistically be done. The F.E.C., consisting of the United States, France, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, India, Australia, China, the Soviet Union, and the Philippines, remained firm that punishment and retribution was the only appropriate solution for Japan, and some even argued that the Japanese should not be receiving food aid so as to prevent them from having a higher standard of living than the Soviets or the Chinese (the average Japanese citizen in 1945 lived on about 1000 calories a day).<sup>46</sup> However, MacArthur viewed the F.E.C. as nothing more than a vengeful power-grab and did everything in his power to keep the F.E.C. away from policy deliberations, stating: "We do not come in the spirit of conquerors."<sup>47</sup>

One way in which MacArthur showed the Japanese that the United States were looking for cooperation was by encouraging his soldiers to mingle and interact with the locals. Elizabeth Vining, Crown Prince Akihito's American tutor, wrote,

Wherever Americans went, the children crowded about, shy, curious, friendly, smiling. They reflect what they hear at home. If there was hatred and bitterness in the family circle, the children would represent that.<sup>48</sup>

The Japanese even referred to the Americans as the "happy soldiers" due to their kind and welcoming demeanor.<sup>49</sup> Some locals even invited soldiers to have dinner at their homes, a practice MacArthur allowed under the condition that soldiers bring their own food due to the food shortages.<sup>50</sup> U.S. soldiers were treated harshly

---

<sup>43</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 87.

<sup>45</sup> Gallup Organization, Gallup Poll # 1944-0335: Presidential Election/Education.

<sup>46</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 93-103, regarding complaints by the Far East Commission; Tucker, *Battles That Changed History*, 554, regarding the caloric intake for average Japanese citizen.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 94. This was one of MacArthur's famous quotes regarding the occupational policy that was heavily criticized by Far-East-Commission nations who wanted to carve up Japan for territory.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Windows for the Crown Prince Akihito of Japan* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2000; first published 1952), 116.

<sup>49</sup> Rinjirō Sodei *Dear General MacArthur: Letters from the Japanese during the American Occupation*, ed. John Junkerman, trans. Shizue Matsuda (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 50.

<sup>50</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 88.

for any crimes they committed against the Japanese, something the latter were surprised to learn, yet pleased to see. According to one recorded instance, a U.S. soldier was sentenced to ten years of hard labor for breaking into a local's home.<sup>51</sup> While rape, assault, and theft did occur on occasion, such crimes were routinely met with harsh punishment. Many U.S. soldiers, as well as civilians stationed in Japan during the post-war reformation period, shared their experiences in interviews, letters, and memoirs. Each of their stories reflects the personal hardships endured by the Japanese due to the war and, in some cases, sheds light on how occupation policies were viewed as beneficial by many of the locals.

In a 2009 interview, one Nisei (i.e., an American-born descendant of Japanese immigrants) by the name of Frank Inami shared a story about himself and his wife eating sushi in Kyoto, where the woman working the food stand spoke with gusto about the fact that she no longer had to work on Sundays, thanking MacArthur for providing her with legal equality.<sup>52</sup> Another Nisei soldier, Takashi Matsui, mentioned in his 2010 interview that poor, possibly homeless, children would follow trains carrying soldiers, hoping to obtain some candy. He then shared his recollection of meeting a former Japanese soldier who, by his guess, still wore his uniform because it was all he had. Matsui attempted to pay the local for a haircut, but the latter refused the payment, stating, “[You] owe me nothing.” When Matsui forcibly handed the man some money and cigarettes, he replied, with tears in his eyes, “I [have] never seen a kind person like you.”<sup>53</sup> And this was not Matsui's last encounter with a former soldier: he remembered an experience in Ginza where a former Japanese soldier was selling whatever he could to provide for his family, including his war medals.<sup>54</sup> Many American soldiers stationed in Japan during the post-war period had similar experiences with locals who, while desperate, appeared to be viewing the Americans with gratitude and optimism. Masuo Kato, one of two Japanese reporters on the USS *Missouri* during the surrender ceremony, reflected on his people's *Kokutai* during the imperial period:

We were poorly led, but we cannot ascribe our misguidance to the militarists and statemen alone. We were lacking [...] in the understanding of the importance of individual liberty and the will to protect it. In its place was only a feudalistic submission to power, and in that respect the whole nation must accept responsibility for the war.<sup>55</sup>

During the first year of the occupation, the desperation to provide or find food was a constant theme for almost every Japanese civilian. Japan had already been

---

<sup>51</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 88.

<sup>52</sup> Frank Inami, interview by Richard Hawkins, June 27, 2009, San Francisco, California, transcript, *Japanese American Military History Collective*, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Takashi Matsui, interview by Richard Hawkins, October 18, 2010, Seattle, Washington, transcript, *Japanese American Military History Collective*, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Takashi Matsui, interview by Richard Hawkins.

<sup>55</sup> Masuo Kato, *The Lost War: A Japanese Reporter's Inside Story* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1976), 88

facing serious food shortages before the surrender, and MacArthur knew that he did not have time to survey the situation: he needed supplies right away. Because Washington officials were more concerned with shipping food to war-torn Europe, MacArthur relied on former U.S. President Herbert Hoover, the honorary chairman of the U.S. Famine Emergency Committee. Hoover referred to the respective crisis in Japan as “comparable to a Buchenwald concentration camp.”<sup>56</sup> While it took time to figure out grain acquisition and delivery, within two and a half years the caloric intake of the Japanese was averaging closer to 1600.<sup>57</sup>

The next major issue to tackle was the disarmament of the population, specifically targeting the military structure. Over three million troops needed to be disarmed, and ten thousand airplanes, three thousand tanks, ninety thousand artillery pieces, as well as millions of small arms, explosives, and naval mines around the coast, needed to be destroyed,<sup>58</sup> and this did not even include the weapons and arms stashed throughout the countryside that had been intended for the *Ketsu-Go* plan. Hundreds of thousands of tons of chemical-warfare supplies had to be destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of small arms were confiscated from the civilians.<sup>59</sup> As for the latter, they were not “forcibly” confiscated either, as MacArthur set up a system of self-disarmament whereby weapons were turned over willingly to U.S. forces in return for immense gratitude and praise by the general and his men.<sup>60</sup> Japan’s former soldiers and civilians expected to be humiliated, and when this did not happen, they felt that they had been lied to by their leaders who had claimed that the Americans and the West were cruel monsters intent on eradicating the people of Japan.

One last act worth mentioning here is MacArthur’s assistance in re-establishing baseball as a major sport. During the disarmament process, many baseball bats had been confiscated, but when MacArthur realized baseball’s potential for showcasing a commonality between the U.S. and Japan, he called for all bats to be returned, and he imported thousands of new baseballs and mitts to be handed out to children.<sup>61</sup> Even though the country was still unstable, he called for professional baseball games to resume, had American soldiers teach the game to children, and even participated in games himself at times. MacArthur saw an opportunity for healing between two cultures, and the fact that baseball is still Japan’s biggest sport speaks volumes to the effort made during the post-war years in this regard.

---

<sup>56</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 106. Buchenwald Camp was one of the largest and deadliest concentration camps in Nazi Germany where, similar to the practices at Auschwitz Camp, forced starvation and disease were among the primary killers. Hoover made the comparison to describe his reaction to the gaunt, skin-and-bone Japanese civilians.

<sup>57</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 106.

<sup>58</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 104.

<sup>59</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 104.

<sup>60</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 104.

<sup>61</sup> Morris, *Supreme Commander*, 104-105.

*Conclusion*

General Douglas MacArthur's careful attention to Japan's government, society, and culture turned the post-war occupation into a success. The Japanese logically thought that harsh revenge was to be brought upon them due to their actions during the war. Had the United States not been the leader in the Pacific theater, a vengeful punishment exacted by other nations might have destroyed the Japanese nation, their *Kokutai*, their culture, and their sovereignty. MacArthur's role in overseeing the country's reformation allowed the Japanese to redefine themselves without a destructive revolution that might have led to yet another totalitarian regime. The leniency shown to them humbled the Japanese people enough to realize their own errors without feeling demonized. This is what is meant by this essay's title, "A Velvet Glove and a Big Stick:" MacArthur's delicate touch, backed by a powerful military presence, ultimately provides a lesson in post-war state-building. This approach is especially significant when an occupier seeks to leave key individuals of the previous regime in place. In the case of Japan, it likely prevented the kind of resurgence of ultra-nationalist rhetoric and agitation seen in Weimar Germany after the Great War. Thus, MacArthur's legacy—and the example he set between 1945 and 1951 in a defeated and occupied nation—is one to be studied and worthy of recognition.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Dakota Vasco of Brea, California, earned his B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) (2022), where he is a member of the History Student Association (HSA). His essay printed above originated in a seminar on Historical Writing offered by CSUF's History Department.*