

## THE LAST EIGHT DAYS OF WWII: HIROSHIMA TO SURRENDER <sup>1</sup>

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A couple of months ago I ran across an old book <sup>2</sup>I had flipped through but not read called “The Fall of Japan” by William Craig. What I read there inspired me to go dig out another nicely detailed account of those last days researched and published by a K-25 chemical colleague, Dr. Gene Rutledge, who in the 1990s, long after retiring, got so interested in this story that he went to Japan and researched the story there making lots of Japanese friends and telling the story of Japan’s two nuclear bomb efforts in more detail than I have seen in any other sources – researched in more detail than have others because of his uranium enrichment expertise at K-25. I also dug out a very contemporary account of those days in TIME magazine’s issue of the week after surrender, an issue that my friend Dunc Lang kindly gave me years ago. I thought you might enjoy hearing a brief summary of those fateful days from these sources.

The greatest issue for Japan’s rulers throughout these end-days was the Potsdam Ultimatum or Declaration of July 26, 1945 to which they had officially responded the very next day with words that to them meant “no comment at present” but which most news services overseas mistranslated as a huffy “not worthy of comment.”

Although at the “top”, the Japanese government had some semblance to a democracy, it was decidedly not one. They had a Diet, a large body similar in make-up to our Congress, but which was ineffectual as far as the conduct of the war. There was also a group similar to our Cabinet, but it was consulted only after the fact so was not a real factor in the war either.<sup>3</sup> The group that really “called all the shots” was the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War. Then overall, in a unique and mostly ceremonial role, was the Emperor.

The Emperor, Hirohito, was thought by the Japanese people to be a Divine being descended from the Sun Goddess. Up until this time he did not issue advice or commands. However he attended enough of the “power” meetings to be well aware of what was going on in his country. Accounts

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<sup>1</sup> Washington was on “Eastern War Time,” Daylight Saving Time 12 months a year to save energy. EWT was 13 hours behind Tokyo’s “Far Eastern Time.” Instead of working out and adding details of exact timing on some single time basis (which I was sure my audience would care little about, what I have done in this talk is to tell what happened each day according to the place it happened. Tokyo events on Tokyo time, Washington ones on D. C. time.

<sup>2</sup> Given to me some years back by my dear friend Col. Jim Hill, Deputy Manager of DOE’s Oak Ridge Office, and WWII navigator of a B-17 flying from India over and bombing Burma’s jungles including the River Kwai!

<sup>3</sup> Craig, page 105

say he was personally an introvert, almost painfully shy, but very “sharp” and a good scholar. He had worked to become a recognized expert on Marine Biology, authoring several books in that field. As a young man he shocked everyone by insisting on visiting Europe, the first Emperor to ever travel abroad.

He loved Europe and its culture and came home with especial admiration for Britain and Edward, their Prince of Wales. Here in 1945 he had become more and more sickened by the great casualties and destruction of his country and was leaning more and more toward an end to the war.

There were just six men who were effectively in charge of the Empire during the war – the members of the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War.<sup>4</sup> Ever since the July Potsdam Declaration the Council was dead-locked, 3 to 3. The three in favor of peace were:

[1] Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki, (to me a young) 80 years old and well-liked titular head who managed to straddle both war and peace parties, but who was personally for peace.

[2] Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo<sup>5</sup> a brilliant intellectual and strong supporter of surrender, not to be confused with Hideki Tojo who led Japan into the war and bombing of Pearl Harbor and was later forced from power. Togo’s role was similar to our Secretary of State, head of their diplomatic corps.

[3] Navy Minister Mitsumasa Yonai, who also championed the cause of “conditional” surrender. None of these three peace-leaners would accept Potsdam’s demand for unconditional surrender.

Lined up against them were the three strong militarists:

[1] War Minister Korechika Anami, the leader of the die-hard militarists and the Commanding General of all the Japanese armies throughout Eastern Asia. He was the most powerful man in Japan. He demanded that all the armies and all the people of Japan fight to the end and never surrender their country.

[2] General Yoshijiro Umezu, Chief of Staff for the Imperial Army, was a General leading Japan’s terrible invasion of China that killed 15 million Chinese, the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest WWII casualties of any country in the world, 15 million Chinese died compared to 2.5 million Japanese.<sup>6</sup> (He was the General who had to sign the final WWII surrender document for Japan.)

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<sup>4</sup> Craig, page 105.

<sup>5</sup> Not to be confused with Hidecki Tojo, the Prime Minister that ordered the attack on Pearl Harbor. In fact H. Tojo, years before, had appointed this S. Togo his Foreign Minister in 1941, but Togo resigned a year later because he felt Tojo was too aggressive. Togo was for a time Japan’s Ambassador to Germany and later to Russia. H. Tojo resigned after Japan lost Saipan in 1944, feeling the war was lost, and tried (unsuccessfully) to kill himself. Both were convicted of War Crimes, Tojo was executed, Togo died in prison in 1950.

<sup>6</sup> Eliot, Gil; “Twentieth Century Book of the Dead”, Chas. Scribners & Sons, NYC, 1972. page 83.

[3] Admiral Soemu Toyoda- the Navy's Chief of Staff, determined to continue to fight <sup>7</sup> even though all his big ships were on the bottom of the Pacific. He had a brilliant mind and was a persuasive speaker.

It was these six, the first 3 vs. the last 3, who really ruled the Empire during the last year of Japan's war against us. Let's now look at what went on in that Supreme Council those last fateful days.

Monday, Aug 6. 8:15:17 AM. We Ridgers are very familiar with the story of how the final end of the war began with the operationally flawless Enola Gay flight and dropping of the U-235 bomb on Hiroshima. When the flight returned to Tinian Island, word was cabled to President Truman who was eating lunch aboard the USS Augusta in the Atlantic on his way home from Potsdam.

Tuesday. Aug. 7; the First Day of 'The Last Eight.' The Hiroshima blast so destroyed all of its communication lines that it is not until midday on Tuesday before the Supreme Council gets the news that Hiroshima had been bombed and survivors oddly report they only saw one or two bombers. The Supreme Council asks one of Japan's scientists to go there and report back. <sup>8</sup> He returns that same Tuesday evening and told them it was a new brand-new kind of weapon that released nuclear energy. <sup>9</sup>

All of the Council are very well aware that 66 of their Japanese cities have already been burned out by our squadrons of B-29's, including Tokyo where 100,000 were killed five months before and 16 sq. miles were burned out compared to the 4 sq. mi. at Hiroshima. Massive destruction of Japanese cities is nothing new. But this is a new kind of threat that might be continued, and when added to the terrible losses at Midway, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa plus the coming (they feel is certain) Allied invasion of their homeland further steels the convictions of the three on Council who want to end the war. But the militarists, Anami, Umezu, and Toyoda vehemently continue to argue that the Japanese armies with still 1.5 million men under arms together with all their men, women, and children defending their homeland could inflict such huge casualties on any invasion force that the US would end up agreeing to a peace with acceptable terms.

To them agreeable terms would include among others: no occupational forces, no War Crimes trials or punishments, but most importantly no change in the position and power of their Emperor. All six of the Council oppose Potsdam's demand for unconditional surrender. <sup>10</sup> They also all agree today (Tuesday) that the one big hope is to take advantage of the non-aggression pact with Russia and try to get the Soviets to help negotiate good terms. So they frantically cable Moscow to feel out how Russia might feel about helping.

Wednesday, Aug. 8. Day 2. The news from Russia is just the opposite of what the Council wants to hear: the Russians have broken off the peace pact with Japan and Russian armies are on the way to attack Japan this very night! [Little did they know that Truman's #1 priority at Potsdam was to talk

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<sup>7</sup> Craig, page 110-111.

<sup>8</sup> They had a number of very capable physicists, Rutledge says the man sent was Prof. Nishina who had run their Army's small but futile Thermal Diffusion research on U-235 production. Another source says it was Prof. Sagane who had done graduate work with Serber at U. Cal.

<sup>9</sup> Both their Army and their Navy had sponsored very small-scale enrichment research during the war.

<sup>10</sup> Craig, pages 66-67.

Stalin into coming into the war on our side, and that Stalin agreed to do so and attack Japan by August 15!]

Thursday, Aug. 9. Day 3. Thursday morning the Supreme Council meets at 10:30AM and immediately receives the bad news that Russian armies have attacked Japan's armies in Manchuria. That changed no minds: The Council remained deadlocked in the 3:3 stand-off on accepting the Potsdam demand for unconditional surrender. The three moderates were now saying they would accept some conditions, while the three hard-liners still argued for never surrendering. They argue that the Armies were so committed to the defense of their nation that many would never surrender (remember their frightful Kamikazes, forerunners of modern suicidal terrorists?). A little after 11:00 AM this Thursday the Supreme Council is given the tragic news of a second A-bomb attack, the plutonium "Fat Man" bombing of Nagasaki.

[An interesting footnote is that when some instruments were dropped to measure and radio-back the physics of the blast, a lot of copies of a letter were dropped with them addressed to a top Japanese nuclear physicist, Prof. Sagane, written (but not signed) by Robert Serber of LASL fame. He had attended the University of California graduate school with Sagane. Serber's letter implores Sagane to explain to the top leaders what the atomic bomb is and how important it is to surrender to save Japanese lives. Of the hundreds of copies dropped, one copy did eventually reach Sagane, but it got to him a week after Japan had surrendered.]

Later that Thursday, Emperor Hirohito, their Divine Emperor, moved to tears by the terrible loss of life and destruction of his country, decides to break his traditional silence and voices his feelings to Council that the war should come to an end. That a divine being would speak to such earthly issues was unheard of, but all six on the Supreme Council revere the Emperor and feel moved to find a way to surrender with some conditions.

Thursday night in Washington, our President Truman makes a radio report on the war to the nation attracting 40 million listeners, the biggest radio audience since "Victory in Europe Day" (VE Day). He speaks about the new atomic bomb, about the Russian entry as another one of the Allies, and the need for Japan's unconditional surrender.<sup>11</sup>

Friday, Aug. 10. Day 4. Because of the Emperor's very unusual intervention, the full Council today all agree (3 very reluctantly) on ending the war BUT only with the condition that the Emperor and his role is untouched.

TIME Magazine reports the receipt of this, their first surrender offer in Washington:

"Truman was up early in the day as usual, about to leave his second floor rooms when a messenger brought him this urgent, formally-worded, diplomatic dispatch:

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<sup>11</sup> Truman closed on this note: "We have emerged from this war the most powerful nation in the world. The thing we have learned and should never forget is this: that a society of self-governing people is more powerful, more enduring, more creative than any other kind of society, however disciplined, however centralized."

*‘In obedience to the gracious command of His Majesty the Emperor, the Japanese government are (sic) ready to accept the terms enumerated at Potsdam with the understanding that said declaration does not comprise any demand which prejudices the prerogative of His Majesty as a sovereign ruler.’”*

Since this is clearly not the “unconditional” surrender the Allies agreed on at Potsdam, it brings on heavy debates in Washington.

Saturday, August 11. Day 5 sees back-to-back meetings all day in Washington. The first Truman calls is for 9 AM with just four key leaders: Secretaries of State, James Byrnes, of War, Henry Stimson, Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, and Truman’s Chief of Staff, Admiral William Leahy. For most of the day in various meetings both Truman and Secretary of War Stimson are leaning toward yielding on Potsdam’s demand for “unconditional surrender,” feeling retaining the Emperor might help in some ways such as in assuring the surrender of Japan’s armies scattered all over East Asia and otherwise help with the occupation. Many agree, but Secretary of State Byrnes objects firmly all day, arguing this “loophole” could be used by die-hard militarists to talk the Emperor into vetoing orders from the occupation’s Commanding General, thus making the latter’s position very much more difficult and weakening his authority. Near the end of that long Saturday, Truman becomes persuaded Byrnes is right and tells him to draft a reply rejecting the proposed Japanese offer. Byrnes does so overnight, and masterfully.

Sunday, August 12. Day 6. Truman approves the Byrnes draft, and his State Department sends back a long formal reply to Japan that includes Byrnes’ carefully-crafted and straightforward rejection of Japan’s surrender condition:

*“From the moment of surrender, the authority of the Emperor and the Japanese government to rule the state shall be subject to the supreme commander of the Allied powers.”*

There follow several paragraphs of details and then comes the final blow to those on the Supreme Council:

*“The ultimate form of government of Japan shall, in accordance with the Potsdam Declaration, be established by the freely expressed will of the Japanese people.”*

Simply put, whether Japan wants to have an Emperor or not is up to the people to decide. (Within a year the Japanese wrote a Constitution setting up a constitutional monarchy, said no to their old system, and Hirohito was replaced by his Uncle.)<sup>12</sup>

Monday, August 13<sup>th</sup>. Day 7. Wanting to keep up the pressure on Japan, Truman orders the Air Force to resume their incendiary bombing of Japan, but specifically orders them also *not to drop* any more A-Bombs. [The U. S. has another plutonium bomb (like the one dropped on Nagasaki) that could be ready in four more days, but it would take us at least a month or so to make another U-235 bomb (like Little Boy).]

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<sup>12</sup> Following about a year with his Uncle on the “throne”, Hirohito resumed the throne.

The Supreme Council spends all today, Monday, tied up in knots, stalemated over just how to respond to the U.S. refusal to grant Japan's condition respecting the Emperor.

Tuesday, August 14<sup>th</sup>, the eighth day after Hiroshima. Emperor Hirohito has Premier Suzuki call a meeting of the Supreme Council to be held in the Emperor's underground bomb shelter. (After it, one of those present commissioned a painting of this historic meeting<sup>13</sup> Here is the way Author Craig tells what happened:

*"The Emperor kept them waiting and sweating out the heat for some minutes in the closed, cramped, underground room, then came in dressed in his full military uniform, white gloves and all.*

*"Everyone rose, bowed to him, and sat. Premier Suzuki, 80 years old, apologized for calling on the Emperor for guidance, and first went over the events that had brought the Council to its present impasse over the U. S. response. Suzuki then invited the Supreme Council members to state their positions.*

*"Generals Anami and Umezu spoke but each was so choked with emotion for continuing the war that their speeches were ineffective. However the third militarist, Admiral Toyoda, calmly and brilliantly reviewed the classic points: the Emperor's position must be maintained, there must be no occupational force, no war crimes trials, and the clause about the government being determined by the free will of the people is, he said, "most dangerous and will undermine our entire Japanese tradition." There were no other speakers.*

*"Suzuki then asked the Emperor to speak which he did, with much difficulty. Soon after he began he choked up, sobbing out phrases, pausing often to gain control. He spoke about how difficult it would be for the Army and Navy and their people to accept surrender after all they have been through; of how difficult it would be to see the country occupied by their former enemies, and to see their leaders accused of war crimes. But, Hirohito said, 'I cannot endure the thought of letting my people suffer any longer.' He could barely go on, he and many around the table were in tears. He closed with this: 'It matters not what happens to me, but how can I answer the spirits of the ancestors if the nation is reduced to ashes. Therefore as the Emperor Meiji (had to) 'endure the unendurable', so shall I --- and so must you.'" <sup>14</sup>*

*"Few in the room saw him leave because most sat crying in their hands."*

After the meeting Hirohito directed his Ministers to draft a statement for him to record and next day read to the whole Empire. In the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> (that same day) some die-hard Army officers actually attempted to overthrow the government by trying to steal the Emperor's recording from the Palace and issue one of their own to continue fighting. But the plot was discovered and foiled, and

<sup>13</sup> Craig, page following page 144.

<sup>14</sup> Hirohito's "endure the unendurable" was translated by some as "We must bear the unbearable."

Hirohito read his announcement to the Empire, closing his message saying he was resolved to pave the way for a “Grand Peace” for all the generations to come. WWII at last was over, and his personal role in making it happen was drowned out in the U. S. and other countries by everyone’s wild rejoicing over the end of the war.

#### Epilogue – What Next?

- Right after the Emperor’s speech to the people of Japan, the Supreme Council of Six all resigned.
- General Anami, the chief leader of the war, pledged his support to the Emperor, apologized to his troops, and committed suicide.
- Hirohito soon stepped down and was replaced for just about a year by his Uncle, but then resumed the symbolic title and served his country’s constitutional monarchy for 43 more years until his death in 1989.
- General McArthur organized his key occupational staff and landed in Japan in two weeks on August 30<sup>th</sup>.

Over the next six years McArthur’s occupation forces did an excellent job of catalyzing the building of a new government and a sound economy for Japan. In 1946, a new brand new Constitution was written democratizing and demilitarizing the country, modeled after our Bill of Rights and Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal social provisions, giving full rights to women, and stripping the Emperor of his power but leaving him as symbolic head of a country governed by the people. Hirohito served them so well and so long.<sup>15</sup>

- The formal surrender took place aboard the USS Missouri on September 2 in Tokyo Bay, crowded with vessels of our Navy. One of the Supreme Council’s three “die-hard” militarists and a conqueror of China, General Umezu, had to sign the unconditional surrender.
- The world was finally at peace after six terrible years.

In a remarkable post-war interview, Emperor Hirohito responded to a reporter’s question about the use of the bombs in this way, “I feel it is very regrettable that nuclear bombs were dropped, and I feel sorry for the citizens of Hiroshima. But it couldn’t be helped because it was wartime.”<sup>16</sup>

Japan we all know has thrived in the half-century since – of special interest to Ridgers is how they embraced nuclear power as a substitute for importing coal, oil, and natural gas. They have built 54 reactors and fueled many of them with Low-Enriched 235 fuel they bought from USA diffusion plants. As an old K-25er who lived through those grand days of K-25 making piles of money for

<sup>15</sup> Hirohito’s place was taken by his Uncle for about a year then he returned to the throne.

<sup>16</sup> Coster-Mullen, John; “Atom Bombs: The Top Secret Story of Little Boy and Fat Man; privately published, 2001, page 38. He quoted this from the book “The Japanese Monarchy” by Nakamura Masanori, Armonk, NY, 1992 140.

Uncle Sam, I'm always proud to tell folks that Japan was K-25's biggest low-enriched uranium customer during K-25's years in that business (1965-1980). That is just one little and very distant legacy of the "Grand Peace" Hirohito deserves the credit for bringing about that ended the last eight days of WWII.

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