Volume 3 | Issue 8 | Article ID 1871 | Aug 03, 2005

The Emperor, Modern Japan and the U.S.-Japan Relationship

Herbert P. Bix

The Emperor, Modern Japan and the U.S.-Japan Relationship: an Interview with Herbert Bix

*The foremost Western authority on the life and times of Emperor Hirohito -- known posthumously as the Emperor Showa -- talked to **The Japan Times** about the role of Japan's former "living god" and his place in history in comparison with other powerful twentieth century leaders including Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt and George W. Bush.*

In 2000, historian Herbert P. Bix shattered the image of Emperor Hirohito as a mere figurehead who was detached from Japan's imperialist warmongering in the first half of the 20th century.

Bix argued in Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan, which won him the Pulitzer Prize, that the emperor was intimately involved in the decision-making behind his military's ruthless campaigns. Hence Bix contends, the Emperor bore heavy moral, legal and political responsibility.

Bix explains why Japan will be unable to realize its full democratic potential without re-evaluating Emperor Showa. Bix also explores what lessons today's world leaders can learn from a study of this enigmatic figure.

At the postwar Tokyo war crimes tribunal, the Allies indicted 28 Japanese war leaders for "crimes against peace," "violations against the laws and customs of war" and "crimes against humanity," including the Nanjing atrocities in 1937-38 and the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. Seven were hanged.

Bix maintains that Emperor Showa was shielded from trial by Allied commander Gen. Douglas MacArthur and his staff, who feared communists and wanted to harness the Emperor's domestic popularity to hasten Japan's recovery, and so suppressed damning evidence of his war involvement.

In this interview, Bix ranges widely from wartime Japan and the U.S. at war to Washington's contemporary policies in Iraq.

How did you come to write "Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan?"

I wanted to write a history of modern Japan. I was interested in the Emperor and I wanted to situate the Emperor and the imperial institution in the entire modernization process.

I wanted to show the development of the Emperor's personality, his ways of thinking and his involvement in public life.
Did you set out to determine whether he was a dictator who should be held accountable for Japan's role in World War II?

I knew from the very outset that he wasn't a dictator, and that dictatorship was not in the Japanese historical experience. The Emperor was a participant in a pluralistic decision-making system. Yet no one had questioned his responsibility for the war in light of the central position he played in political and military

affairs.

1. Crown Prince Hirohito on July 20, 1923

The Emperor died in January 1989, just when the Cold War order was collapsing and the new era of instability was setting in. That's when some important material started to become available. I got a copy of Kinoshita Michio's diary of the wartime imperial entourage published by Bungei Shunju in 1990. I was also sent a copy of the Showa Emperor's monologue that he dictated for the Occupation authorities early in 1946 that Bungei Shunju published at the end of 1990.

When I read those, I said, Aha! Here is a human being like the rest of us, and . . . with this new material I could return to the study of the institution, having previously written about the emperor system very schematically and abstractly -- as most people did.

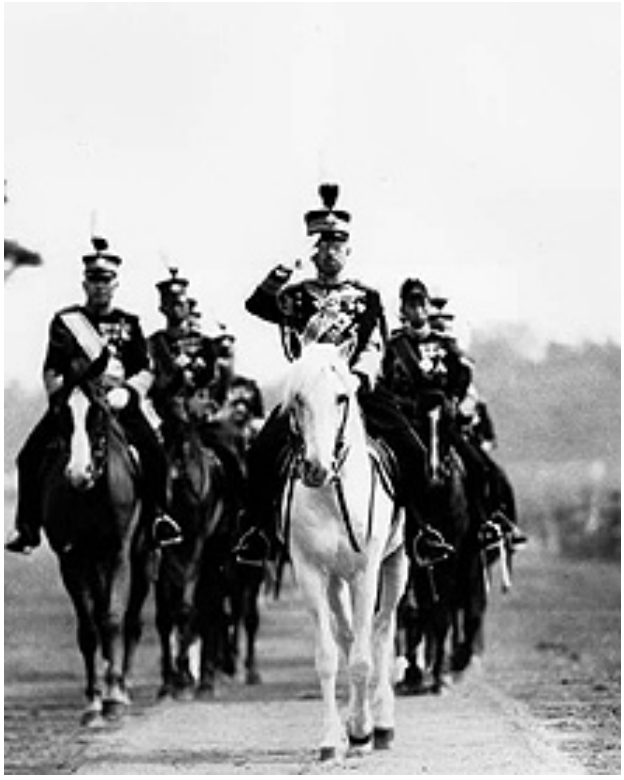
This new evidence made me want to revise outdated and erroneous views. Japanese people -- and the world -- had been told only about the Emperor's innocence in starting the Pacific War and his heroism in ending it. It now became possible to look seriously into the question of Hirohito's war responsibility.

In other words, I started off in search of the real Hirohito because I had doubts about the official view. And . . . I found that none of the claims about him could stand careful scrutiny.

2. Emperor Hirohito on Nov. 30, 1943

How would you contrast Hirohito's responsibility with that of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini? In other words, did Hirohito bear responsibility for the onset of fascism in the same way as those European dictators?

I argue that he bore moral, legal and political responsibility of the highest degree for the war -- and that responsibility extended also to war atrocities.



3. Emperor Hirohito at a military parade in May 1937

Hirohito stood at the center of a system of power that disciplined the Japanese people to be loyal subjects of the imperial state.
What distinguished him from a Hitler or a Mussolini, or for that matter, a Churchill or a Roosevelt or any other Western leader, is that he stood at the head of a state and was considered to be a living deity. What other modern state at that time was headed by a living deity?

Hirohito received an education in idealized Confucian norms and in Bushido. He was taught above all to be a benevolent monarch and he wanted to live up to those ideals. As a result, he was not only very active behind the scenes, but also sharper than most historians and political observers recognized.

Hirohito was Imperial Japan's hereditary head of state; he was the supreme commander of Japanese forces. He was also a religious leader and the nation's chief pedagogue. Because he lived in a world of high politics, naturally he engaged in politics. made choices. His choices had consequences.

Here is a man who bore enormous responsibility for the consequences of his actions in each of his many roles. Yet, he never assumed responsibility for what happened to the Japanese and Asian peoples whose lives were destroyed or harmed by his rule.

Hirohito often gave orders without issuing commands. This isn't unique to Japan. It is the "voiceless order" technique that high officials in countries around the world routinely employ. It's acting by not acting -- we see this in American history as well.
I gave the examples of the Nanjing Massacre, which I believe Hirohito had to know about. And I talked about his roles in helping to undermine political parties and the rule of Cabinet government, and in delaying surrender. In every period, he plays a role in politics and military decision-making -- but he came to military decision-making gradually.

For example, regarding the delayed surrender. At the end, in 1945, the army and the navy and the Supreme War Leadership Council and the Cabinet, all had 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 he was more concerned about preserving an empowered monarchy -- with himself on the throne -- than he was about saving the lives of his people.

At the end, during June and into July, when the American terror bombing of Japanese civilian

targets reached its peak, Hirohito showed no determination to bring the war to an end. This needs to be assessed against the dominant American and Japanese view that credits him with making the heroic decision to end the war.

He never took responsibility for the war that was carried out in his name. Japanese people, the young men of whom 2.6 million would die, went to war believing that they were defending their country, showing their loyalty to him. The war was a tragedy both for Asian people who Japan conquered and for the Japanese people, both military and civilians

In the end, with Japan in ruins, following the firebombing of Japanese cities, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Soviet entry into the war in Manchuria, Japan negotiated surrender terms that preserved Hirohito on the throne.

Through all this, the emperor never acknowledged loyalty to his subjects, still less to other war victims. The only responsibility he acknowledged was to his ancestors.

In the book, you portray a coterie of officials raising Hirohito to be the hands-on, authoritarian leader that his own father, Emperor Taisho, never was. Should Hirohito's upbringing, in which he appears to have been the product of intense indoctrination, not absolve him to some degree from responsibility for the militarist departure from the "Taisho democracy" movement and for Japan's wartime atrocities?

I never said that he was groomed to be an authoritarian leader. I wrote that he was socialized to be a benevolent monarch.
"Authoritarianism" was assumed in the Japanese political context. Emperor Meiji was his model, not his father, and he was the product of an intense socialization and indoctrination process. I don't think this absolves him, to any serious degree, from responsibility for the destruction of Taisho democracy.

Why not? Surely, many liberal thinkers today would argue that someone who grows up in an authoritarian environment, and later becomes authoritarian himself, cannot be held entirely to blame, due to the experience of their upbringing.

Yes, there were extenuating circumstances, but that didn't absolve him from political, or moral, or legal responsibility. Particularly in the case of his sanctioning wars of aggression.

I imagine that many Japanese nationalists reading your book would say, "What right have you to tell us we shouldn't have done this, when we were living in an era of violent, global Western imperialism? This was the only way for the Emperor to defend his nation."

This was an age of imperialism, but Japan like other nations had options. Japan could have pursued different foreign policy choices in late Meiji [1868-1912], in Taisho [1912-26] and in early Showa [1926-89] -- a different foreign policy vis-a-vis Korea, China and the Western countries. But Japan's leaders in each period chose not to do so.

In Meiji and most of Taisho, the so-called realist decision-makers of Imperial Japan acted prudently. The problem was that at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the '30s they lost their bearings and made one error after another. But there were always options. Japan always had options; it didn't have to become a rogue state that brought disaster not only to Asian countries but to the Japanese people as well.

Do you see any similarities between the way Hirohito and his key advisers went about their business and the conduct of

today's world leaders?

Today Japan confronts a world shaped by a new militarism that has arisen in the United States, a new face of empire, a government in Washington that has not hesitated to launch and justify wars of aggression.

The United States after 9/11 launched a war against Afghanistan and then a few years later, ignoring the Security Council, the Bush administration launched an illegal war against Iraq.

You might say that the Americans' preventive war against Iraq was in many ways far worse, than Japan's attack on an American military base, in an American colony, in December 1941.

Stop and think about it: Pearl Harbor was an act of aggression directed against a naval base in the Pacific that belonged to the most powerful nation in the world, an act that initiated the Pacific War. By contrast, the Iraq war was launched by the world's only hyperpower against a defenseless country that has already resulted in more than 100,000 civilian Iraqi deaths. In this respect a better comparison might be with Japan's Manchurian Incident of 1931 in which the military used a pretext to seize Manchuria and create Manchukuo, leading Japan on the road to war that would take more than ten million Chinese deaths over fifteen years.

Oil, military bases, and revenge were important factors in the decision of the Bush administration to go to war in Iraq. That war had nothing to do with either Bush administration claims linking the war to 9/11 or to Iraqi possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction. In both Manchuria and Iraq, the reasons for going to war were fabricated.

Do you think Hirohito should have been tried and punished, and if so, how?

I never said he should. What I did say was that the Japanese people should have been allowed to freely discuss his role, and he should have been allowed to abdicate. Indeed, he should have been encouraged to abdicate, and the Japanese people should have been encouraged to freely debate the Emperor's role and the role of the Imperial institution. But Gen. MacArthur and the Truman administration shielded the Emperor. Not only was he protected from prosecution, but he was never even called to testify at the Tokyo Trials, and the documents concerning his war responsibility were placed off limits.

I think the joint efforts of Americans and Japanese to preserve the Imperial institution, each for different reasons in what I call a de-facto partnership, had disastrous consequences whose impact continues to be felt in Japanese politics and in the U.S.-Japan relationship.

Do you believe a segment of the Japanese conservative leadership wants to wage war again?

Well, they want to be able to wage war without restriction. They call it being a "normal" state. Of course this is highly regressive, because Japan remains a leader precisely because it has the non-nuclear principles and it's not a major exporter of arms to other countries.

But many conservatives are dissatisfied with Japan's long subordination to the United States. Japan has a sort of satellite, or client, relationship with Washington. A person like the governor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintaro, attracts that wing of the party that is quite dissatisfied, and he transfers his frustration to China. I think this only adds to complications in East Asia.

You see the conservatives using every opportunity to exploit fear -- fear of North Korea, fear that Japan might be invaded. Japan has a pretty strong military that is perfectly

capable of defending itself. It's inconceivable that any foreign country would invade Japan.

But we're seeing politics here. We're seeing an effort on the part of the conservatives, the LDP, to revise the Constitution, particularly to eliminate Article 9 that restricts Japanese capacity to fight overseas wars.

What significance do you see in Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's long-held insistence on visiting Yasukuni Shrine?

That question really goes back to how we define the era in which we're living, because, not only is the Asia-Pacific War "history," but the Occupation is history, and the postwar period is history. The Cold War is over. The political situation is one of searching for a new threat so as to impose discipline and reorder things.

In this new environment, the Japanese people remain divided on the meaning of the war and postwar experiences. Memories of the Asia-Pacific War have evolved: a younger generation with no experience of war has come on the scene, and a minority of influential elites -- overrepresented, of course, in the LDP -- have asserted publicly an affirmative view of the war.

I think the actions of the prime minister and likeminded conservatives in his Cabinet in visiting Yasukuni Shrine and seeking to eliminate Article 9 of the Constitution have to be set against this lack of national consensus as well as against the new international configuration of powers offers to change Japan.

It's demonstrably untrue that the Japanese people have never changed their views of the last, lost war. But Koizumi's actions allow many Chinese and Korean people, and other peoples in Asia, to have that false view.

Germany seems to have fared better than Japan in grappling with its wartime past. What must Japan do to put World War II behind it once and for all, and normalize relations with Asian neighbors?

German elites found it in their national interest to gain the trust of their European neighbors, and to quickly reintegrate into western Europe. Over the last quarter century, they've done rather well in grappling with their legacy of their war criminality and overcoming the past.

But the circumstances for Japan were entirely different.

During the early years of the Occupation, Japanese intellectuals went much further than their German counterparts in grappling with issues of war responsibility. This has not been sufficiently appreciated.

At the same time, however, there is no unified "Japan" that hews to erroneous views of the past. Divisions remain deep. Every generation of Japanese has revisited World War II, and will continue to do so.

This is a revised and abbreviated version of an interview by Eric Prideaux that appeared in The Japan Times: August 9, 2005. Eric Prideaux is a staff writer for The Japan Times. This article appeared in Japan Focus on August 26, 2005.