



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on September 20, 2020

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## MacArthur Makes a New Japan

When the Second World War ended with Japan's crushing military defeat in 1945, Japan was in a horrific condition. Phone, power, and sewer services were nearly non-existent. Thirteen million were unemployed — one-seventh of the country. Five million Japanese had perished. Fifteen million were homeless, with 700,000 homes destroyed in Tokyo alone.

The average adult was living on a meager 1,000 calories a day — if that.

Despite such utter devastation, Japan eventually emerged from its total defeat and devastation to take its place today as the world's third-largest economy. While several factors are involved in Japan's rise from the ashes, like the Phoenix of Greek mythology, and much credit should, of course, go to the people of Japan themselves, one man stands out as most responsible for this amazing recovery — General Douglas MacArthur.

He had no small task. In addition to the intense economic problems, General MacArthur had to contend with powerful forces inside Japan, with an aggressive push by the Soviet Union to occupy part of the nation, and with Soviet communist allies within the country. MacArthur even faced opposition from many in his own government. Average Americans wanted revenge for the bombing of Pearl Harbor and Japanese atrocities during the ensuing war, such as the infamous Bataan Death March. Over one-half of American military personnel taken prisoner by the Japanese died in prisoner-of-war camps (compared to about one percent in German camps).

Much revenge had already been exacted, of course. For example, some Japanese civilians trying to escape the massive fires in Tokyo and other major cities, caused by American fire-bombing, had tried taking refuge in water tanks, only to suffer being boiled alive by the intense heat. Then the two atomic bombs destroyed much of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Historians, theologians, and average Americans have long debated the moral and strategic issues involved in the use of atomic weapons on civilian targets. It could be argued that the moral line (between waging war on civilians versus combatants) had already been crossed with the fire-bombings — after all, it makes little difference whether one is killed with a fire-bomb or an atomic bomb. More relevant to our discussion here is the question as to the necessity of the atomic bombs to end the war, and how their use impacted the occupation.

Some have argued that their use made it easier for Americans to forgive Japan for Pearl Harbor. Others



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have made the case that had the bombs not been dropped, not only would hundreds of thousands of Americans have died in the invasion of the Japanese home islands, but far more Japanese would have died in any such invasion. Of the 2,300 Japanese soldiers defending the islands of Attu and Kiska near the Alaskan mainland, only eight were taken prisoner — the others fought to the death.

Interestingly, MacArthur had never been consulted on the bombs' use. Perhaps it was suspected that he believed the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were "completely unnecessary from a military point of view," as he asserted in his memoirs, arguing that if the Potsdam ultimatum to Japan of July 26 just had included assurances that the emperor would not be removed or harmed, the Japanese would have capitulated immediately. He never changed his mind that Japan would have surrendered without the use of the atomic bombs. Regardless, Emperor Hirohito responded on August 14, 1945, to the dropping of the two atomic bombs by publicly announcing the unconditional surrender of his nation.

Two days earlier, MacArthur had been named the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers, which meant that he would oversee the occupation of Japan. And his accomplishments in Japan overshadowed all others in his long military career, which included exemplary service in World War I, a stint as the Army chief of staff, his commendable performance in the Pacific Theater of the Second World War, and his future brilliant Inchon landing in the Korean War. What Douglas MacArthur achieved in Japan may not only surpass those accomplishments, but might exceed those of any other leader — military or civilian — in world history, except for Jesus Christ.

## **MacArthur Wins Over the Japanese**

MacArthur created a new country from the ashes of the old — and became beloved by the people he had conquered and ruled for more than half a decade as its virtual dictator.

The formal surrender of Japan took place on board the USS *Missouri* — a decision MacArthur made to honor President Harry Truman, a former senator from Missouri. MacArthur located the site of the surrender on the *Missouri* despite his displeasure that Truman had not consulted him prior to the use of the atomic bombs, while General Dwight Eisenhower had been told of the possible use of the bombs weeks earlier.

The road to peace began with a delegation of Japanese, who arrived in the Philippines on August 19 to begin working out the details of the surrender. When the Japanese expressed misgivings that the surrender document did not accord the emperor with sufficient respect, wisely, MacArthur modified the document, telling an aide, "I have no desire whatever to debase him in the eyes of his own people. Through him it will be possible to maintain a completely orderly government."

This decision — to use the emperor in his plans for a new Japan, rather than try him as a war criminal as most Americans and most members of Congress wanted to do — would prove critical to MacArthur's success in occupation. John Toland, writing in his book *Rising Sun*, said, "To bring the Emperor to trial would provoke guerilla warfare throughout the nation and perpetuate a military government."

It was agreed that MacArthur would enter Japan on August 30 at Atsugi air base, 15 miles west of Yokohama. It was the base kamikaze suicide planes had used to wreak much havoc in the last months of the war. There was great concern for his safety, but MacArthur saw his arrival in Japan — unarmed — as essential to his success.

MacArthur later explained his thinking: "For the supreme commander, a handful of his staff, and a



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small advance staff to land unarmed and unescorted where they would be outnumbered by thousands to one was foolhardy. But, years of overseas duty had me well versed in the lessons of the Orient.” He added that it would demonstrate that he took the Japanese at their word — key to his strategy to not lose in peace what his country had won in war.

Between Atsugi and Yokohama, a short distance, there were 22 divisions of Japanese soldiers, numbering about 300,000. Yet General Courtney Whitney, MacArthur’s trusted aide, later said about their arrival at the airfield, “The plane nestled down on the field and MacArthur, his corn cob pipe in his mouth, got out. He paused for a second or two to look about him.” Not only was he unarmed, he had directed his staff to carry no weapons — not even sidearms — into Japan.

General Whitney wrote, “All along the roadway the fifteen miles to Yokohama they [Japanese soldiers] stood in a long line on each side, their backs to MacArthur in a gesture of respect. They were guarding the American Supreme Commander in the exact fashion that they guarded their Emperor. There were two divisions of them, thirty thousand men, fully armed.” Later, when the Japanese served them dinner at the Hotel New Grand in Yokohama, Whitney watched with concern as MacArthur ate his food with no regard to the possibility that his meal could have been poisoned.

Winston Churchill later remarked that MacArthur’s arrival, unarmed, at Atsugi was the single most courageous act of the war. Japanese historian Kazuo Kawai expressed similar sentiments: “It was an exhibition of cool personal courage,” he said, adding that it was a “gesture of trust in the good faith of the Japanese. It was a masterpiece of psychology.”

In addition to this courageous act, MacArthur took note of the starving Japanese population. His superiors in Washington expected him to simply do what conquering nations had always done — force the conquered nation to feed the conquering army. But as a keen student of history and drawing upon his own experiences in occupying the area around the Rhine River in Germany after World War I, he knew that such a policy was only a breeding ground of resistance. When Washington officials balked at his plan to transfer three million rations to feed the Japanese, he told them they could either send him bread to continue to feed the Japanese, or send him bullets — and one million reinforcements. He got the food.

Arriving in Tokyo, MacArthur established his office on the top floor of the Dai-ichi insurance building, and began writing and rewriting the speech he would deliver at the September 2 ceremonies on the USS *Missouri*, which he saw as a key part of his efforts to achieve reconciliation with Japan. Foreign minister Mamoru Shigemitsu had to be ordered by Hirohito to be part of the ceremony. The chief of the general staff, General Yoshjiro Umzedu, threatened hara-kiri rather than attend, but in the end he did go.

MacArthur used the ceremony to advance his goal of winning over the Japanese. He chose to say in his speech that the nations were assembled “to conclude a solemn agreement whereby peace may be restored,” rather than bluntly say they were celebrating the “unconditional surrender of Japan.” One of Japan’s civilian representatives at the ceremony, Toshikazu Kase, who was fluent in English, later said that he knew immediately what MacArthur was doing. “Is it not a piece of rare good fortune, I asked myself,” Kase later wrote, “that a man of such caliber and character should have been designated as the Supreme Commander who will shape the destiny of Japan? In the dark hour of our despair and distress, a bright light is ushered in, in the very person of General MacArthur.”



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## General MacArthur Meets Emperor Hirohito

Emperor Hirohito read Kase's description of the event, which gave him hope for his country's future. MacArthur refused advice to either go to the palace and see Hirohito, or order Hirohito to come see him. Finally, on September 27, Hirohito emerged from his palace and was driven the short distance to MacArthur's headquarters to visit the Supreme Commander. General Bonner Fellers, an expert on Japan who had advised MacArthur not to try the emperor for war crimes, greeted Hirohito at the front of the building. He later wrote that Hirohito's hands were trembling and that he looked "frightened to death."

When they met, Hirohito pleaded with MacArthur to not punish the people of Japan, but rather punish him instead: "I come to you, General MacArthur, to submit myself to the judgment of the powers you represent as the one to bear responsibility for every political and military move taken by my people in the conduct of the war." Had MacArthur chosen to imprison or execute Hirohito, his actions no doubt would have pleased the British, the Russians, and even most members of the U.S. Congress — whose constituents were clamoring for Hirohito to be put on trial. But MacArthur knew that Hirohito had been largely only a figurehead during the war, and most importantly, that such a move to try the emperor would lead to a resistance movement.

The American communist newspaper the *Daily Worker* led the way in calling for the death of Hirohito, no doubt realizing that such an action could lead to chaos and pave the way for an eventual communist Japan. Sadly, many American newspapers echoed the desires of the communists, calling for Hirohito's trial and execution. MacArthur also rejected U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson's call for the death of Hirohito, telling him that if that happened, the U.S. government would need to send him a million more soldiers to put down the almost certain rebellion.

Instead, MacArthur was going to use the emperor to advance his plan of occupation. In his memoirs, MacArthur explained that past American occupations had relied on the military rather than civilian authority. He noted "the loss of self-respect and self-confidence by the people, [and] the lowering of the spiritual and moral tone of a population" ruled by the bayonet. He later wrote of Hirohito's positive role in the peaceful occupation: "He played a major role in the spiritual regeneration of Japan, and his loyal cooperation and influence had much to do with the success of the occupation."

MacArthur wanted to decentralize authority as quickly as possible and, perhaps noting what had happened in Nazi Germany with the impunity under which the Gestapo meted out cruel and arbitrary penalties, he wanted the independence of local police from the central government. (Before the war, it was estimated that national police had jailed around 60,000 people for the vague crime of "dangerous thinking.") And he wanted to place authority over the schools in local communities, believing that national control of education leads to "thought control."

## Areas of Special Consideration

Civil liberties were another area that was championed by the supreme commander, and he pushed for implementation of the Anglo-Saxon concept of the writ of habeas corpus, which requires formal charges before a person can continue to be held in jail. The constitution that Japan adopted, at MacArthur's direction, has never been amended, and still includes a controversial "no war" clause, which prohibited a national military establishment. This was included in the constitution that was approved in a national



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vote, at the urging of Japanese Prime Minister Baron Shidehara.

Another controversial part of the constitution, which was included at MacArthur's insistence, was giving the right to vote to Japanese women. In the first parliamentary elections, a mild embarrassment occurred when a prostitute was elected, receiving over 250,000 votes.

By his own admission, MacArthur experienced some trouble in the establishment of a system of free enterprise in Japan. "For many decades a monopolistic control of the means of production and distribution had been exercised by the so-called *Zaibatsu* — about ten Japanese families who practice a kind of private socialism. They controlled 90 percent of all Japanese industry. These great trusts were partially dissolved and a truly competitive free enterprise system inaugurated. We did not expropriate the stock in these industries without compensation. The stockholders, practically all belonging to the big families, were paid off."

But not everyone, of course, was happy with MacArthur's efforts to free up the economy, including Japan's domestic communists, and the foreign communists from the Soviet Union, who were very aggressive in an attempt to occupy much of the country with their own troops. While MacArthur allowed a small number of troops from nations such as Britain, Australia, and New Zealand to join the occupation, he steadfastly refused to let any Soviet soldiers into the country.

As Arthur Herman explained in his book *Douglas MacArthur: American Warrior*, this led to a confrontation with Lieutenant General Kuzma Derevyanko, the Soviet liaison in Tokyo. Derevyanko insisted that the Soviets be allowed to occupy Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan, but MacArthur told him no. Even when Derevyanko began shouting that he would get MacArthur fired, and that Soviet troops would land in Hokkaido, whether or not MacArthur approved, MacArthur retorted, "If a single Russian soldier enters Japan without my permission, I will at once throw the entire Russian mission, including yourself, in jail."

This strong response by MacArthur no doubt saved Japan from having its country dismembered by the Soviet bear, as happened in Europe and in Korea.

By 1946, MacArthur had become, as Herman put it, "the object of admiration, even veneration, to millions of Japanese who saw in the seventy-year-old supreme commander the kind of awe-inspiring reverence once reserved for Hirohito himself."

But MacArthur did not succeed in making Japan a Christian nation. MacArthur opposed theocracy, and did not take up the emperor's offer to declare Christianity the official religion of Japan, but he was able to open the country to Christian missionaries from several American denominations. These efforts were strongly supported by President Harry Truman (despite their differences on other issues). The emperor's uncle, Prince Higashikuni, strongly supported the Christianization of the country, saying, "We need a new standard of ethics, like Jesus Christ. Buddhism can never teach us to forgive our enemies nor can Shintoism. If Japan is to be revived, we need Jesus Christ as the basis of our national life."

Despite such favorable attitudes toward the Christian faith by Hirohito's family and even Hirohito himself, Christianity never took deep root within the country. Today only about two percent of the population is openly Christian.

By the time MacArthur's occupation of Japan ended in 1951, there was widespread grieving in the





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country at his return to America after his dismissal by President Truman during the Korean War. Today, Japan is a peaceful nation, and a strong ally of the United States. While the Japanese retained much of their traditional culture, modern Japan in no way resembles the nation it had been before. The one man most responsible for this amazing transformation from a militaristic and authoritarian nation to what it is today is General Douglas MacArthur.

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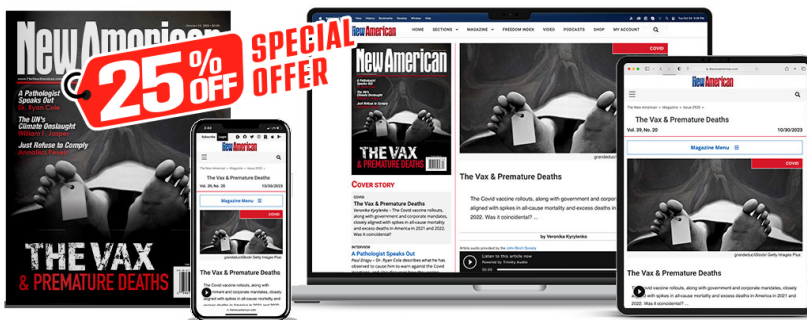


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