



Noriko Kawamura. “Emperor Hirohito and Japan’s Decision to Go to War with the United States: Reexamined.” *Diplomatic History* 31:1 (January 2007).

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During the closing weeks of 2006, the conservative government of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo took two controversial steps toward what Abe and many Japanese conservatives see as releasing Japanese society from the constrictive legacies of its wartime past. First, the government elevated the Defense Agency, which has since 1954 administered Japan’s Self Defense Forces, to cabinet level status as the Ministry of Defense; a move clearly designed to bolster future attempts at striking Article Nine (the “no-war” clause) from the Japanese constitution. Second, the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) controlled Diet passed revisions to the 1947 Fundamental Law on Education that will for all intents and purposes compel public schools in Japan to promote patriotic sentiments in students through regular curricular instruction. Trends such as these reflect the passionate battles over history that are raging in Japanese and East Asian society today, and Noriko Kawamura’s insightful article is an important and timely contribution to one of the most controversial issues at the center of these struggles: the role and responsibility of the Showa Emperor (Emperor Hirohito) in Japan’s decision to launch a war against the United States and its allies in 1941 that most reasonable leaders in Japan at the time feared could not be won.

Kawamura’s strategy is to chart a middle path between the historiographic Scylla and Charybdis of postwar scholarship on Hirohito: conservative historians (whose views Kawamura calls “orthodox”) tend to exonerate the Emperor as one of many victims of the right-wing militarists who high-jacked Japan’s civilian government during the wartime years, while leftist Japanese (and American) historians place ultimate responsibility and blame at the Emperor’s feet because of his political and moral failures as the nation’s indisputable “commander in chief” (*daigensui*). In particular, Kawamura is intent on disputing the left-leaning interpretation of Herbert Bix in his Pulitzer Prize winning, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (2000). In Kawamura’s view, Bix and the leftist Japanese scholarship that informs much of his book offers oversimplified conclusions based on selective evidence, thus producing an excessively politicized interpretation of Emperor Hirohito’s role in the decision to attack the United States. Kawamura does not deny that the Emperor “must share some sort of responsibility for the war.” (54) Her emphasis, however, is on elucidating the “precarious and ambiguous position” held by the Emperor above the “highly complicated triangular power relations” (57) among court advisers, cabinet officials, and military officers. In short, Kawamura argues that Emperor Hirohito was personally opposed to war with the United States, but he was more or less powerless to reverse decisions based on an already achieved consensus among the army and navy general staffs, the ministers of war and navy, and the cabinet. At best, all he could do was delay the initiation of hostilities for as long as possible while urging the political and military leadership beneath him to seek a diplomatic solution to the crisis in U.S.-Japan relations.

To illustrate this argument, Kawamura deftly guides the reader through a series of the most critical moments during the five months between early July and early December 1941. The imperial conference of September 6, for example, is explored in great detail since scholars such as Bix point to it as clear evidence that Hirohito could have pursued peace, but instead chose war. Kawamura disagrees, effectively exposing Bix's misuse of primary sources to make his case, and instead suggests that Hirohito still believed at this stage that the supreme command had "agreed to give priority to diplomacy, not to war preparations." (63) Kawamura also makes a provocative case for reinterpreting the resignation of Prime Minister Konoe in mid-October and the subsequent selection of General Tojo Hideki as his replacement. Leftist historians, according to Kawamura, often cite this shift as clear evidence of Emperor Hirohito's "inclination toward military solutions." (69) Quite effectively, Kawamura argues instead that the emperor chose to "gamble on General Tojo's loyalty to the throne and his leadership ability to control the war factions in the military." (70) In other words, the emperor and his most trusted court advisers hoped that Tojo's sense of personal devotion to the imperial sovereign would enable them to rein in those elements eager for war long enough to give diplomacy a chance to succeed. By the end of November, however, Kawamura shows that such tactics simply could not overcome the bureaucratic momentum toward war that had been gaining strength since the summer. Hirohito tried one last time on November 30, one day before the December 1 imperial conference that sanctioned the decision to attack the United States less than a week later, to caution his leadership against rash action, but it was to no avail. Thus, Kawamura concludes, while the emperor himself was not in favor of war with the United States, "his influence was circumscribed within the nebulous triangular relations among the court, the government, and the military", and "He eventually succumbed to the persistent pressure of the military bureaucracy." (79)

The most fascinating problem here, of course, is how the will of the august emperor, a living god according to imperial mythology and wartime ideological rhetoric, could be ignored with such recklessness? Kawamura employs Max Weber's claim that "even an absolute monarch . . . is impotent in the face of the superior knowledge of the bureaucracy" (58) to explain how this seemingly implausible situation came about in the case of Emperor Hirohito. One might fault Kawamura for not fully developing this explanation beyond the mere evocation of Weberian sociological theory, but, to be fair, that task would require at least another substantial article. Even so, Kawamura's analysis does begin to shed light on this dynamic of imperial impotence by revealing the extent to which allegedly absolute loyalty to the imperial house was often far less than absolute when it came to matters of power politics. Indeed, Kawamura shows how time after time military officials spoke with one voice of reverence for the infallibility of imperial wisdom and another of pragmatic (and perhaps even cynical?) desire to persuade the emperor to accept the logic of their own viewpoints.

Kawamura's success in elucidating this contradiction is related to her broader concern with situating wartime Japanese politics within the context of both the late nineteenth century Meiji constitutional system and its even deeper roots. For example, in pointing out that "neither the army nor the navy could completely ignore the emperor's will because they needed his sanction, however ceremonial it might be" (57), Kawamura places the scene in late 1941 squarely within centuries-old patterns of imperial politics in Japanese society. Not since the ill-fated Kenmu

Restoration of 1333-36 had a Japanese emperor ruled in a politically meaningful way in Japan, but the legitimacy bestowed by imperial recognition was in many ways just as critical to an early twentieth-century admiral or general as it was to a medieval samurai warlord. Put simply, while the ruling elite of Japan ruthlessly employed the ideology of emperor worship to maintain their grip on power and crush dissent within Japanese society during the 1930s and 1940s, the extent to which those elites themselves actually practiced it was highly circumstantial.

One final point on the matter of imperial authority concerns the way that Kawamura initially frames her argument about the Pacific War's beginning by accepting a basic premise about the war's end; namely, it was the power of Emperor Hirohito's command that compelled Japan's ruling regime to accept the terms of the Potsdam Proclamation and surrender to the Allied forces. However, as Tsuyoshi Hasegawa has most recently reminded us in his *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman and the Surrender of Japan* (2005), Emperor Hirohito's word did not silence all of those within the ruling elite of Japan who wanted to carry the fight to an apocalyptic final act. On the eve of the imperial broadcast that ended the war, a small cadre of fanatical military officers plotted a coup to prevent the Emperor's speech from reaching the airwaves. While the plotters failed, their attempt clearly reveals how even in this most desperate hour there were some who believed their views were more correct than those of the imperial sovereign. But, perhaps unintentionally, Kawamura's insightful explication of imperial weakness to stop the war's beginning actually helps us to understand even better this dynamic of Japan's ultimate defeat. In both scenarios, the will of the emperor was challenged by those whose ideological orientation and political prerogatives put them at odds with the throne.

With this article, Kawamura has made a significant contribution to our understanding of Emperor Hirohito's role in the prosecution of Japan's war against the United States and its allies. While there is certainly room for more debate concerning precisely why Emperor Hirohito was so ineffective in projecting his desire to avoid war, the analysis nonetheless deserves special merit for its sensitive appreciation of the ways in which the character of domestic Japanese power relations influenced the course of the empire's foreign relations with tragic results.

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