

COMMENTARY

August 1945

Japan's Hirohito conceded, he did not surrender

By George Koo

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Recently, Japan's Imperial Household released a DVD set containing a re-mastered and digitized version of Emperor Hirohito's speech that was recorded for national broadcast on the eve of Japan's surrender thus ending WWII. The actual broadcast was made on Aug. 15, 1945 marking the official end of the war.

While the release of the improved quality of Hirohito's speech was widely reported, I could not find any official explanation as to the reason for making this version available now. Presumably, it is part of Japan's contribution to celebrate or commemorate or memorialize the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII, depending on one's personal perspective.

Having now read the text of the Emperor's speech, I have a better understanding of why the self-image of postwar Japan can be so vastly different from the view of Japan by others. I was a child in China during the war. If I grew up in Japan and heard the Emperor's speech, I could easily have concluded that Japan was a victim of WWII. Nothing in his speech would suggest that Japan was the aggressor and guilty of provoking the devastating conflict.

The Japanese language is characterized by nuanced, indirect expressions. I recall reading one the old popular business books written to educate gaijins (foreigners) on the subtleties of

communicating with the Japanese. The title was something like "Japanese have 16 ways of saying "no,"—none as simple as a straightforward no. Interacting with my Japanese friends, I found that they have many ways of expressing apology and regret but never with seamless candor.

Indeed, we can see by deconstructing the Emperor's speech that "telling it like it is" is not in the Japanese make-up.

First, Hirohito said: "*We have decided to effect a settlement of the present situation by resorting to an extraordinary measure.*" What he meant was, "We have to surrender unconditionally."

Next, he said, "*We have ordered Our Government to communicate to the Governments of the United States, Great Britain, China and the Soviet Union that Our Empire accepts the provisions of their Joint Declaration.*"

The Western powers interpret this statement to mean that the Emperor accepted the terms of unconditional surrender as outlined in the Potsdam Declaration. Yet can anyone

expect the ordinary people in Japan to make the same connection from his speech, a speech where "surrender" and "Potsdam" were conspicuously absent? Thanks to the way post-war textbooks are written, most people in Japan have not even heard of Potsdam Declaration.

Then he said, "*It being far from our thought either to infringe upon sovereignty of other nations or to embark upon territorial aggrandizement.*" He obviously was not referring to Japan's invasion and occupation of Manchuria as early as 1931 and certainly not the occupation of Korea since the latter part of 19th century.

Nothing in his (Emperor Hirohito's) speech would suggest that Japan was the aggressor and guilty of provoking the devastating conflict.

And he said, "*The war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage.*" Certainly a masterful

understatement under the trying circumstances he was facing.