[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. (1930-1945, Politics)]

[Document 56]: “The war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan’s advantage.”

Emperor’s surrender statement, broadcast at noon, Wednesday, August 15, 1945.

To Our Good and Loyal Subjects:

After pondering deeply the general trends of the world and the actual conditions obtaining in Our Empire today, We have decided to effect a settlement of the present situation by resorting to an extraordinary measure.

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.

To strive for the common prosperity and happiness of all nations as well as the security and well-being of Our subjects is the solemn obligation which has been handed down by Our Imperial Ancestors, and which We lay close to heart. Indeed, We declared war on America and Britain out of Our sincere desire to ensure Japan’s self preservation and the stabilization of East Asia, it being far from Our thought either to infringe upon the sovereignty of other nations or to embark upon territorial aggrandizement. But now the war has lasted for nearly four years. Despite the best that has been done by everyone—the gallant fighting of military and naval forces, the diligence and assiduity of Our servants of the State and the devoted service of Our one hundred million people, the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan’s advantage, while the general trends of the world have all turned against her interest. Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is indeed incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should We continue to fight, it would
not only result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization. Such being the case, how are We to save the millions of Our subjects; or to atone Ourselves before the hallowed spirits of Our Imperial Ancestors? This is the reason why We have ordered the acceptance of the provisions of the Joint Declaration of the Powers.

We cannot but express the deepest sense of regret to our Allied nations of East Asia, who have consistently cooperated with the Empire towards the emancipation of East Asia. The thought of those officers and men as well as others who have fallen in the fields of battle, those who died at their posts of duty, or those who met with untimely death and all their bereaved families, pains Our heart night and day. The welfare of the wounded and the war-sufferers, and of those who have lost their homes and livelihood, are the objects of Our profound solicitude. The hardships and sufferings to which Our nation is to be subjected hereafter will be certainly great. We are keenly aware of the inmost feelings of all ye, Our subjects. However, it is according to the dictate of time and fate that We have resolved to pave the way for a grand peace for all generations to come by enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable.

Having been able to safeguard and maintain the structure of the Imperial State, We are always with ye, Our good and loyal subjects, relying upon your sincerity and integrity. Beware most strictly of any outbursts of emotion which may engender needless complications, or any fraternal contention and strife which may create confusion, lead ye astray and cause ye to lose the confidence of the world. Let the entire nation continue as one family from generation to generation, ever firm in its faith of the imperishableness of its divine land, and mindful of its heavy burden of responsibilities, and the long road before it. Unite your total strength to be devoted to the construction for the future. Cultivate the ways of rectitude; foster nobility of spirit;
and work with resolution so as ye may enhance the innate glory of the Imperial State and keep pace with the progress of the world.


Context.
The drama surrounding Japan’s decision to surrender in World War II encompassed the struggles of a divided Supreme War Council, the confused response to the Allies’ surrender demand in the Potsdam Declaration, the devastation of atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the shock of the Soviet Union’s August 8 decision to break its neutrality pack and enter the war against Japan. The final agreement to surrender, which was opposed violently by military extremists even though many civilians saw it as long overdue, led to another dramatic choice: the decision to have the Emperor himself record a surrender speech that would be broadcast publicly at noon on August 15. Japanese emperors had never spoken in public before; so the medium of the announcement would be almost as shocking as the message. Because the emperor’s voice was high-pitched and the recording was scratchy, many could not understand his eloquent words. But the fact that Japan was surrendering was clear. Although many wept, their tears were as often of relief as of sorrow, because the national ordeal was over. War’s end had brought what the Nobel literature laureate Ōe Kenzaburo would later call a “curious freedom.”
Questions.

1. How could the Emperor have ordered the attack at Pearl Harbor, yet claim that Japan’s sole goal had been “to ensure Japan’s self preservation and the stabilization of East Asia”? Does this sentence give insight into other nations’ justifications when they go to war?

2. Summarize the Emperor’s reasons for ending the war, and describe the points he makes to engender hope for the future.

3. Analyze the overall tone of this document. How would it have been different if it had been addressed to the Allies rather than to the Japanese citizenry?

Terms.

*Joint Declaration*. This phrase, used twice, refers to the July 26 Potsdam Declaration that had demanded “unconditional surrender” and laid out the Allies’ plans for Japan after the war.

“We, ’’ “ye.’’ Emperors, by custom, spoke in an elevated language, different from that of ordinary people and hard to understand. The translation uses the Imperial ‘We’ and the archaic “ye” to give that sense.

“Outbursts of emotion.” The admonition to avoid “outbursts of emotion” and “fraternal contention and strife” revealed deep concern about extremists in the military who were determined to use any means to prevent the surrender. A number of violent acts, including assassination and coup attempts, were carried out by army personnel in the hours before the Emperor’s broadcast.
[A thought: we might want to include a portion of Ōe’s NYT essay “The Day the Emperor Spoke in a Human Voice” (5-7-95) as an accompanying document. It recalls, with a nice human spin, listening to the surrender broadcast in Shikoku. That piece also might be a nice start to the postwar section.]