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CHAPTER 5

The Japanese Government, *Ketsu-Go*, and Potsdam

On July 18, 1944, ten days after the last major battle on Saipan and six days after the horrible mass suicide on Marpi Point, Emperor Hirohito, ignoring assessments from his military advisors that the situation was irretrievable, ordered that the island be recaptured. In doing so, he was mirroring earlier commands dating back to 1942 and Guadalcanal that had imposed unattainable objectives on Japan's military forces. However, as on several other important occasions, after Saipan the emperor's wishes were not translated into military policy. Naval officers did spend the next week planning and debating an operation to retake Saipan, but on July 25 they informed Hirohito that it could not be done. Still, while the emperor had to accept that depressing but accurate tactical judgment, his basic strategic thinking remained unchanged: the Americans could be stopped in their tracks and Japan could extract itself from its crisis if its forces could win one major victory. As he told the parliament in an official statement called an Imperial Rescript on September 7, 1944, "Today our imperial state is indeed challenged to reach powerfully for a decisive victory. You who are the leaders of our people must now renew your tenacity and, uniting in your resolve, smash our enemies' evil purposes, thereby furthering forever our imperial destiny."¹

Hirohito was not alone in his confidence in the strategy of winning a decisive victory. That belief was held by most of the small group of men who controlled

Japan, and it resonated deeply in Japanese history. In 1905, the victory over the Russian navy in the Battle of Tsushima Strait decided the Russo-Japanese War and lifted Japan to the status of a great power. It had been the basis of Tokyo's military strategy vis-à-vis the United States since before World War II began and of Admiral Yamamoto's great gamble at Pearl Harbor. Perhaps even more to the point in the desperate years of 1944 and 1945 was the great Battle of Tennozan, considered one of the most crucial battles in Japanese history. Fought in 1582 near a small mountain from which it takes its name, Tennozan was an all-or-nothing gamble by a military leader named Hideyoshi. Having defied the odds and staked everything on that one battle, Hideyoshi won a decisive victory, and in doing so made himself Japan's supreme ruler and one of its greatest heroes as he united the country for the first time.

Of course, during the Pacific War "decisive victory" did not mean the same thing in mid-1944, and even less so in 1945, as it did back in 1941. As Japan's military situation deteriorated, Hideyoshi's successors lowered their expectations of what their decisive victory might accomplish. In historian Edward Drea's apt summary, it inexorably declined from "victory, to negotiated peace, to bloody stalemate." As for what that meant for the empire, by 1944 the dreams of military superiority and control over much of the Pacific and Southeast Asia had faded. In its place was the far more modest goal of avoiding a humiliating surrender and thus preserving what the Japanese called *kokutai*, their imperial system of government in which the emperor was sacred and sovereign and the military enjoyed primacy of place in political life. This, in fact, was what Prime Minister Hideki Tojo told the army's vice chief of staff late in June 1944.²

Along with Hirohito's order to recapture Saipan, July 18, 1944, also saw Tojo's government fall, its prime minister fatally discredited by the Saipan disaster. The new government was headed by the relatively unknown and nondescript General Kuniaki Koiso, who for the preceding two years had been serving as governor general of Korea. Like the impossible order regarding Saipan, the choice of Koiso reflected the deep malaise and inability to come to grips with reality that afflicted the Japanese leadership. That paralysis in no small part was a function of the country's system of government. Despite its parliamentary facade, the Japanese wartime government in reality was a dictatorship, but a complex one composed of formal and informal institutions based on Japanese traditions whose method of operation is not always easy for outsiders to understand. A tiny elite, headed by the emperor, controlled the government. Within the government, the power of the military—and especially the army—was decisive. This was because the army minister had to be a serving general nominated by the army itself. If the army minister resigned, the government would fall, and if the army refused to name a new minister, a new government could not be formed. Because the navy had similar authority, the military had a double-barrel gun

pointed at the government. In addition, there existed what in effect was an inner cabinet, since 1944 known as the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War (SCDW). Although it had no constitutional standing, the SCDW exercised crucial authority by virtue of its membership: the prime minister, foreign minister, the army and navy ministers, and the chiefs of staffs of the army and navy. Aside from amplifying the power of the military by its membership, the SCDW, or “Big Six,” did so further by requiring unanimity to reach a decision, the same debilitating system that prevailed in the larger cabinet.

Grafted onto and often dominating this awkward structure was the convoluted and often subtle role of the emperor, the figure whom the constitution called “sacred and inviolable” and whose status transcended the constitution itself. In fact, at its promulgation in 1889 the constitution was declared a gift to the people of Japan from the emperor. His power theoretically was supreme. Among other prerogatives, the emperor could convoke and dismiss parliament, select the prime minister, and issue emergency laws when parliament was not in session; he also was the supreme commander of the army and navy. However, reality and practice did not conform to theory. The constitution specified that the emperor had to carry out his powers in accordance with its provisions, one of which stated that “all Laws, Imperial Ordinances, and Imperial rescripts” required the countersignature of a minister of state. The emperor was expected to delegate his powers to public servants he selected to carry out his will, and this in practice removed day-to-day decisions and operations from his control. Still, Emperor Hirohito, assisted by his closest advisors, was a real and powerful political force behind the scenes. Despite practical limits on his activities and actual power, he exercised crucial and often decisive influence on governmental policy decisions. During the Pacific War he was briefed frequently and thoroughly on the military situation, although generally the information he received was filtered and hence distorted so that he would support the positions of his top army and navy officers. Nonetheless, during the course of hundreds of military briefings Hirohito could and did ask questions that both helped him understand the situation under discussion and enabled him to express his opinion. The emperor traditionally did not speak at meetings with top government officials called imperial conferences, which included members of the SCDW and several other functionaries and were held in order to record final decisions in his presence. However, he could and did influence the decisions that came before him by the questions he posed at meetings that preceded those conferences.

All this made Hirohito’s actions and views critical in the spring and summer of 1945, when Japan was forced toward its final surrender. Throughout that period, his closest advisor, and a man who often expressed his views to members of the government, was Koichi Kido, a nobleman who held the position Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal and, as such, was what historian Robert Butow has called “the eyes and ears of the Throne.”³

A third important event occurred on July 18, 1944, carrying the discussion of the country's mounting troubles beyond the governing elite. Even in a country where a dictatorial regime controlled most of the information about the war, by mid-1944 it was impossible to hide from the people the fact that Japan was in serious trouble. The government admitted as much in a statement issued on July 18 by Imperial General Headquarters, the body through which the emperor exercised his official role as supreme commander. The statement provided a detailed and surprisingly (though not entirely) accurate summary of the Saipan battle, including the final apology of the commanding general for his failure to hold the island. That was followed in August by a translation of an article on the battle from the American weekly magazine *Time*, with commentary by a Japanese correspondent based in Europe, in Japan's largest newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*. It chronicled the end of the battle, including the suicides at Marpi Point. While both the Imperial Headquarters statement and the *Asahi Shimbun* article stressed the heroism of the Japanese and the enormous losses they had inflicted on the Americans, they also graphically told the Japanese people that the war was going badly and that the country faced an extremely difficult future.⁴ Nonetheless, even as the American bombing campaign from mid-1944 until the eve of the atomic bombings pounded their major cities, most ordinary Japanese continued to believe their leaders' promises of ultimate victory and maintained their support of the war effort.

THE KOISO GOVERNMENT

The Koiso government spent much of its short life backpedaling. In November 1944 the prime minister proclaimed Leyte the new Tennozan. When things went badly there, he shifted the Tennozan venue to Luzon in January 1945. In February, as the Americans troops inexorably pushed forward on Luzon and its warships and planes relentlessly bombarded Iwo Jima, the emperor consulted with seven of his top advisors, including six former prime ministers who together formed an advisory body called the *jushin*, about what to do next. Almost to a man, they vigorously supported continuing the war. Only one, former Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe, stressed an urgent need for peace. His "Memorial to the Throne," presented to the emperor on February 14, warned that the war was undermining the social order in Japan and creating conditions for a Communist revolution instigated by the Soviet Union. Responding to a question from Hirohito, Konoe even used the term "unconditional surrender" to describe what Japan should do, although his projection of what that would involve—the United States would not "reform" the *kokutai* and Japan would retain many of its non-Japanese territories—was fundamentally incompatible with the terms the Allies intended to impose upon a defeated Japan under their rather different

concept of unconditional surrender⁵ (see Document D2). That mattered little, inasmuch as Hirohito had no intention of following Konoe's advice, even in the face of intelligence reports he received the next day that the Soviet Union was likely to end its neutrality pact with Tokyo in the next few months and eventually join in the war against Japan. Although Hirohito admitted that he was worried about discontent at home, along with army and navy leaders he now looked forward to a post-Philippines decisive battle that would provide Japan with an opportunity it needed to end the war on acceptable terms.⁶

THE SUZUKI GOVERNMENT AND THE "FUNDAMENTAL POLICY"

During March 1945, American troops secured the Philippine capital of Manila, B-29 bombers firebombed Tokyo and several other Japanese cities, and marines quashed the last Japanese resistance on Iwo Jima. On April 1, American forces landed on Okinawa. Four days later, Hirohito brought down Koiso's government. His new choice for prime minister was Admiral Kantaro Suzuki, an aging but respected hero of the Russo-Japanese war. Suzuki was seventy-eight, hard of hearing, and reluctant to take the job. But he enjoyed the confidence of the emperor, and upon being nominated by the *jushin* he allowed Kido to talk him into accepting the post and its unenviable burden of finding Japan a way out of the war without the humiliation of surrender and with its *kokutai* intact.

That said, the Suzuki government was not willing to even consider surrender or, for that matter, seek an immediate peace. This is clear both from Suzuki's expressed views from April through July 1945 and from the men he chose for the key cabinet posts with membership on the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War. A number of key officials, including Shigenori Togo, Suzuki's choice for foreign minister, agreed that in April 1945 Suzuki's immediate strategy for improving Japan's postwar prospects focused on vigorously prosecuting the war.⁷ Togo, who later recalled that Suzuki was prepared to fight on for at least two more years, in fact was the only member of the new Big Six who argued for some kind of strong peace initiative. He received no support from Suzuki and was relentlessly opposed by the most powerful man in the government, General Korechika Anami, the army minister. A man cast like iron in the classic samurai mold, Anami argued in the spring of 1945 that Japan, which still had a formidable army and controlled vast territories outside the home islands, had not been defeated. Even after Hiroshima, he would argue for continuing the war; in the end, he committed suicide rather than witness his country's surrender. Anami in turn was staunchly supported by Admiral Soemu Toyoda, who became Navy Chief of Staff in May, and Army Chief of Staff Yoshijiro Umezu. The navy min-

ister, Admiral Mitsumasa Yonai, who had been against going to war with the United States in the first place, was slightly more moderate than his fellow military officers but not to the point of openly dissenting from their views until after the bombing of Hiroshima.

Indeed, the main focus of the SCDW when Suzuki and his colleagues took office was on the anticipated American invasion of the home islands. A few months earlier, in January 1945, Imperial General Headquarters had issued and the emperor had approved a directive to prepare to defend against that invasion that became the basis for all future homeland defense planning (see Document D1). On April 8, just after the Suzuki government took office, that plan emerged from Imperial General Headquarters in the form of Army Order No. 1299, or *Ketsu-Go* (Decisive Operation), yet another scheme for a decisive battle with the United States that would save Japan (see Document D3). One of the key provisions of *Ketsu-Go* was an emergency military buildup on Kyushu, where the Japanese military planners correctly anticipated the Americans would attack. Another was to inflict as many casualties as possible on the Americans by attacking packed troop transports out at sea, before they could transfer their vulnerable human cargo to smaller landing craft. That job would fall largely to “special attack units,” or suicide attackers, primarily kamikaze aircraft, which would have first priority in matters of supply. One-man suicide torpedoes (*kaitan*) and “crash boats” (*renraku-tei*) packed with explosives also would attack and ram the transports. Near the beaches, human mines (*fukuryu*), divers carrying explosive charges, would swim underwater up to landing craft and blow them up. Those Americans who made it ashore would face not only regular troops but also an armed population prepared to die for the emperor, often in suicide roles, under the policy the plan called “Every citizen a soldier.”⁸ This military planning was translated into official government policy by the “Fundamental Policy to Be Followed Henceforth in the Conduct of the War,” which rejected the idea of surrender and called for prosecuting the war to the bitter end. Despite a grim assessment of the toll the war was taking on the home front in terms of both production and public morale provided by two reports, the SCDW adopted the “Fundamental Policy” at a marathon meeting held on June 6. At that meeting, only Togo argued that the army’s plans did not take into account the country’s waning strength; Suzuki, on the other hand, militantly supported the army’s position. The full cabinet endorsed the “Fundamental Policy” the next day, and it received the emperor’s sanction at an Imperial Conference on June 8.⁹

There was a weak countercurrent to the powerful, surging tide of determination to fight to the finish. In a diary entry on June 8, Marquis Kido outlined what became his “Draft Plan for Controlling the Crisis Situation,” which he delivered to the emperor the next day. Kido believed the only way for Japan to avoid a complete collapse was to secure a negotiated peace and, crucially, that this would

require direct action by the emperor. He hoped to use the Soviet Union to mediate Japan's negotiations with the British and Americans. Japan's "very generous terms" would include offering to withdraw from the territories it had occupied and agreeing to accept a level of disarmament Kido called "a minimum defense." Kido thereby hoped to avoid an occupation and preserve Japan's political system¹⁰ (see Document D14).

Kido's presentation and further bad news about the state of Japan's military forces had an effect on the emperor's views. Previously, he had been a staunch advocate of a decisive battle. Now he was prepared to endorse diplomatic efforts directed at the Soviet Union as Kido suggested. The idea of making some kind of approach to the Soviet Union was not entirely new; in May the SCDW had agreed that the foreign ministry should initiate discussions designed to make sure the Soviets maintained their current state of neutrality and stayed out of the Pacific War. These discussions, conducted at a low level, yielded nothing. However, the efforts of Togo and Kido did have results, at least in terms of getting Anami and his supporters to agree at a SCDW meeting on June 18 to approach the Soviets about their willingness to mediate peace negotiations. It was, to say the least, an extremely modest concession; according to Togo, the SCDW did not agree to request mediation, but only "to sound out" Soviet willingness to play that role.¹¹ The goal remained a negotiated peace that had nothing in common with the Allied demand for unconditional surrender.

The delusional nature of what the SCDW was willing to consider was not lost on Japanese officials with more realistic outlooks but no power to influence events in the councils of power. They included Naotake Sato, Tokyo's astute ambassador to Moscow, whose cables home repeatedly stressed that Japan could expect nothing from the Soviets and that the only way to avoid catastrophe was to bite the bullet and surrender unconditionally to the Allies. Those cables, and Togo's intransigent responses, were being intercepted and decoded by the American MAGIC operation and forwarded to policy makers in Washington, including President Truman¹² (see Documents C1–C17).

In any event, the emperor followed up the June 18 SCDW meeting by calling an Imperial Conference on June 22. He told the gathering, "I desire that concrete plans to end the war, unhampered by existing policy, be speedily studied and that efforts be made to implement them." In the face of military determination not to compromise its fundamental agenda, the members of the SCDW reached only a vague agreement to try to begin peace negotiations by approaching the Soviet Union. There was no agreement whatever about what peace terms Japan might offer. Meanwhile, a rapid military buildup to meet and throw back the American invasion began on Kyushu in April and grew with each passing month into the summer. In the succinct and apt assessment of historian Richard B. Frank, "At this juncture, then, Japan had neared only negotiation, not peace."¹³

THE POTSDAM DECLARATION AND “MOKUSATSU”

On July 26, 1945, the United States, Britain, and China issued the Potsdam Declaration. The document presented Japan with strict terms, warned that the Allies would “brook no delay,” and promised a grim alternative—“prompt and utter destruction”—if Tokyo did not accept them. Japan would have to surrender unconditionally, undergo disarmament and an occupation, accept a reduction in territory to little more than its four home islands, and undergo a radical overhaul of its institutions that would “eliminate for all time” the influence of the militarists who had provoked the war and as a result would be tried as war criminals. In return, Japan would not be destroyed as a nation, would be allowed to recover economically, and could expect the right to choose a government “based on the freely expressed will of the Japanese people” (so long as that government was “peacefully inclined”) and an end to the occupation¹⁴ (see Document A45).

Rhetoric and the severity of the terms aside, these *were* terms, something Nazi Germany had not been offered when it was forced to surrender without any conditions or promises whatsoever. Togo and his colleagues in the foreign ministry recognized this. When the Supreme Council on the Direction of the War began its discussions on how to react on July 27, the foreign minister warned against rejecting the declaration. He tried to convince his colleagues to delay their response until the Soviet Union had responded to Japan’s proposal that Moscow mediate peace negotiations. Togo did not succeed. Although Anami and the other military men on the SCDW at first had agreed to wait, they reversed field and pressured Prime Minister Suzuki to reject the declaration openly. By then the Japanese press had been allowed to publish a censored version of the document, with parts that might make it seem acceptable excised. Suzuki’s news conference on the afternoon of July 28 ended any speculation in Allied capitals about how Tokyo had received their ultimatum. He said Japan would “*mokusatsu*” it. However one translates the possible meanings of that term—from “ignore” to “kill with silence” or “treat with silent contempt”—Suzuki’s other negative comments that afternoon, in concert with the chorus of insulting terms in the press, slammed the door shut on the Potsdam Declaration. Although Emperor Hirohito was silent, it is clear that he did not disagree with what was being done. Neither current documents nor his postwar statement made in 1946 give any hint that Hirohito favored a more conciliatory response to the Allied ultimatum.

Nothing of substance emerged from Tokyo in terms of opening some channels to the Allies after the rejection of the Potsdam Declaration, despite repeated pleas from a few Japanese officials, particularly Sato, who recognized that Japan

was on the brink of disaster. Hirohito's only action was to express concern for the safety of what collectively were called the imperial regalia, several sacred objects associated with the throne. Admiral Yonai, supposedly more flexible than other military men on the SCDW, believed that time was on Japan's side. On July 28 he told a subordinate, "Churchill has fallen. America is beginning to be isolated. There is no need to rush." Speaking at a cabinet meeting on August 3, Prime Minister Suzuki seemed to think that the Potsdam Declaration indicated American weakness and that "if we hold firm, then they will yield before we do."¹⁵ On August 4, the sensible and increasingly desperate Sato sent Togo a cable in which he again stressed that Japan had a lot to gain, especially in comparison to what had happened to Germany, by accepting the Potsdam Declaration. Then he warned, "However, if the Government and the Military dilly-dally in bringing this resolution to fruition, then all Japan will be reduced to ashes and we will not be able [to avoid] following the road to ruin."¹⁶ Two days later, Togo and the rest of Japan found out how terribly right Sato was.