

Option 1: Make This a Time for Peace

Japan is defeated. Its cities have been reduced to rubble, its army smashed, and its dreams of empire shattered. The U.S. Navy has cut off the Japanese main islands from supplies of raw materials. The United States has achieved the goals our country set out to accomplish four years ago. Now the time has come to make peace.

Japan's top military officials have undoubtedly recognized the hopelessness of their position. Japanese diplomats have already approached the Soviet Union in hopes of negotiating their surrender to our country. What has kept the Japanese fighting for so long is the fear that their emperor may be removed. The Japanese believe that the emperor is a direct descendent of the gods who created their islands and their people. The emperor is thus an essential symbol of Japanese heritage and culture, and Japanese troops will fight desperately, even committing suicide, before they break their obligations to him by surrendering. In a U.S. invasion of Japan's main islands, Japanese fanaticism would kill tens of thousands of American soldiers.

The main stumbling block to Japan's acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration is the confusion surrounding the status of the Japanese emperor. The United States must now step forward and precisely explain our country's terms for peace to Japan. We should assure the Japanese that we do not intend to put their emperor on trial as a war criminal. On the contrary, we should allow Emperor Hirohito to remain as a symbolic national figurehead, much like King George VI of Britain. Once the war is over, U.S. troops will have to occupy Japan just as they are currently occupying Germany. In that setting, the emperor will be a useful tool in helping the United States implement the terms of the Potsdam Declaration. The task of sweeping away the influence of aggressive militarism and implanting democratic institutions will be much easier if we can count on the support of Hirohito.

Dropping atomic bombs on Japan would be a mistake. Japan is so close to surrender that even a demonstration of the atomic bomb is not necessary to bring the war to an end. Atomic weapons were developed to counter the threat of Nazi Germany's atomic program, not to slaughter civilians. Understandably, many Americans have little sympathy for Japan. Japanese leaders treacherously attacked our country at Pearl Harbor. They have waged war with cruelty and barbarity. However, we as Americans must send a message to the world. Americans have fought bravely and honorably. We have not sunk to the level of our enemies. We should end the war now in a manner that reflects the value we place on human life and the dignity of the individual. To unleash the power of the atom against a desperate, defeated people would damage the moral leadership that the United States has gained during the war. Once the guns fall silent, we will need all the good will we have earned to build a world of peace and democracy. In the name of American values and honor, we should clear away the last obstacles to Japan's surrender.

Pros and Cons

Supporting Arguments

1. Removing obstacles to Japan's surrender will produce a speedy end to the war and save thousands of American lives.
2. Allowing the Japanese to give up without betraying their emperor will prevent the deaths of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Japanese civilians and will make the Japanese more willing to cooperate with U.S. occupation forces after the war.
3. Quickly reaching surrender terms with Japan will keep the Soviet Union out of the war in East Asia and prevent the Soviets from demanding a share of the spoils.
4. Permitting the emperor to remain strengthens the hand of the moderates in Japan who wish to end the war and weakens the position of militarist officials.
5. Maintaining the emperor as a national symbolic figurehead will promote stability in postwar Japan and lend legitimacy to U.S. occupation forces.
6. Achieving peace through a flexible, practical policy will bolster U.S. authority and leadership in the postwar world.

Opposing Arguments

1. Allowing the emperor to retain his position will endanger lasting peace. The cult of emperor worship has enabled the Japanese militarists to establish an aggressive, authoritarian regime in Japan and lead their people into war.
2. After suffering nearly one million casualties to defeat fascism and militarism, the American people have a right to expect that their leaders will live up to their pledge to achieve nothing less than the unconditional surrender of Japan.
3. Through their sneak attack on Pearl Harbor and their torture and execution of American prisoners, the Japanese have proven themselves to be evil, ruthless enemies who deserve no mercy.
4. The willingness of our country to negotiate will be viewed by the Japanese as a sign of weakness and will encourage them to continue fighting.
5. Entering into negotiations with Japan will prolong the war and permit Soviet forces to advance into northern China.
6. As the aftermath of World War I showed, unless the roots of aggressive militarism are completely destroyed, new dictators and new wars will spring up again.

From the Historical Record

Letter from President Roosevelt to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, April 5, 1944

“I want at all costs to prevent it from being said that the unconditional surrender principle has been abandoned.... I understand perfectly well that from time to time there will have to be exceptions not to the surrender principle but to the application of it in specific cases. That is a very different thing from changing the principle.”

Memorandum from Secretary of War Henry Stimson to President Truman, July 2, 1945

“We have the following enormously favorable factors on our side—factors much weightier than those we had against Germany: Japan has no allies. Her navy is nearly destroyed and she is vulnerable to a surface and underwater blockade which can deprive her of sufficient food and supplies for her population. She is terribly vulnerable to our concentrated air attack upon her crowded cities, industrial and food resources. She has against her not only the Anglo-American forces but the rising forces of China and the ominous threat of Russia. We have inexhaustible and untouched industrial resources to bring to bear....

“We have great moral superiority through being the victim of her first sneak attack.... I believe Japan is susceptible to reason in such a crisis to a much greater extent than is indicated by our current press and other current comment.... I personally think that if...we do not exclude a constitutional monarchy under her [Japan’s] present dynasty, it would substantially add to the chance of acceptance [of the surrender demands].”

Draft position paper from Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Grew to Secretary of State James Byrnes, July 1945

“The occupying forces of the Allies shall be withdrawn from Japan as soon as [our objectives] have been accomplished and there has been established a peacefully inclined, responsible government of a character rep-

resentative of the Japanese people. This may include a constitutional monarch under the present dynasty if the peace loving nations can be convinced of the genuine determination of such a government to follow policies of peace which will render impossible the future development of aggressive militarism in Japan.”

Report from Combined British-American Intelligence Committee to the Combined Chiefs of Staff, July 8, 1945

“We believe that a considerable portion of the Japanese population now consider absolute military defeat to be probable. The increasing effects of sea blockade and cumulative devastation wrought by strategic bombing, which has already rendered millions homeless and has destroyed from 25 to 50 percent of the built-up area of Japan’s most important cities, should make this realization increasingly general. The entry of the Soviet Union into the war would finally convince the Japanese of the inevitability of complete defeat. Although individual Japanese willingly sacrifice themselves in the service of the nation, we doubt that the nation as a whole is predisposed toward national suicide. Rather, the Japanese as a nation have a strong concept of national survival, regardless of the fate of individuals. They would probably prefer national survival, even through surrender, to virtual extinction.

“The Japanese believe, however, that unconditional surrender would be the equivalent of national extinction.... Foreign occupation of the Japanese homeland, foreign custody of the person of the Emperor, and the loss of prestige entailed by the acceptance of ‘unconditional surrender’ are most revolting to the Japanese. To avoid these conditions, if possible, and, in any event, to insure the survival of the institution of the Emperor, the Japanese might well be willing to withdraw from all the territory they have seized...and even to agree to the independence of Korea and to the practical disarmament of their military forces.”