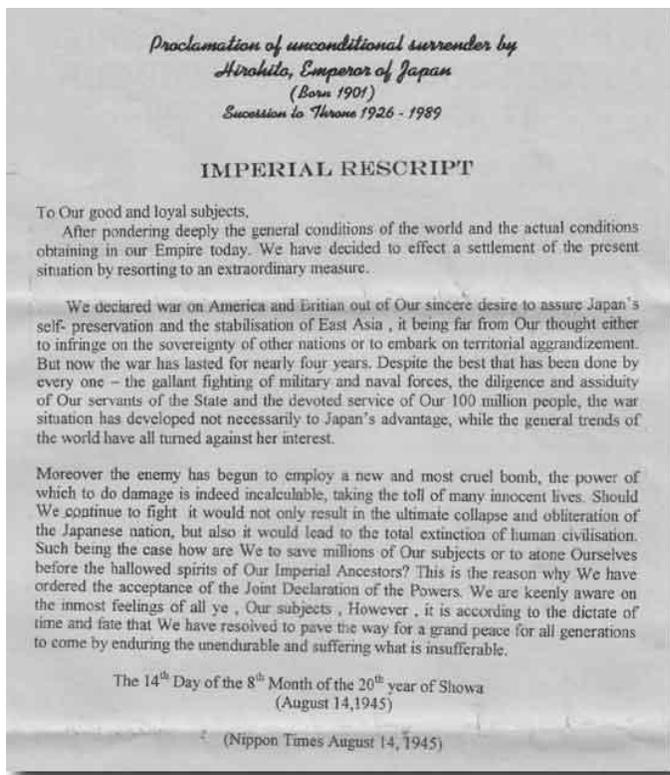


Mitchell's Musings 12-12-11: When is the War Over?

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Just about a year ago, this Mitchell's Musings series was begun on EPRN. Also, by coincidence, last week contained December 7, 2011, the 70th anniversary of Pearl Harbor Day. Both of these occurrences of the past led me to think – in an admittedly odd way – that we are likely to be facing our current economic dilemma (and its very closely aligned political stalemate) for quite some time. That's not a happy thought but many of the items posted by researchers at our EPRN point to that conclusion.

I had an uncle – now deceased 30 years - who served in the Army during World War II in the Pacific Theater. He once told of being stationed on one of the U.S.-occupied islands in the Pacific awaiting the military invasion of mainland Japan, a task widely expected to be a very bloody affair. In the meantime, he had a job taking messages that were received and decoded at a radio office on the island to the local commander. A message came in saying an atomic bomb had been dropped on Japan. To my uncle, this message sounded like science fiction. Atomic energy had been talked about as some possible distant prospect up to that time; not something on the immediate horizon. In any event, suddenly Japan surrendered and my uncle was taken by ship to Yokohama, the port near Tokyo, and told with another soldier to take a local commuter train to Tokyo and report to a particular address. He and his companion boarded the train filled with Japanese, with some trepidation. They were the only Americans on board. The other passengers could have torn them apart. But in fact they were treated deferentially by the other passengers. Why? Because Emperor Hirohito had said the war was over.



Recently, I came across a similar account by another American soldier who described a similar sequence of events - including the train ride in which nothing happened because the emperor had said the war was over. It's worth listening to that soldier's description at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCugmebnCNA>. Apparently, such stories were common. Despite the fierce fighting before the War suddenly ended, once the emperor said it was over, it was (largely) over.¹ Indeed, the emperor's announcement – which was recorded on a phonograph record for subsequent broadcast – was expected to be the final word, so much so that rogue Japanese military officers sought to prevent the broadcast knowing what its consequence would be.² But their coup failed.

There is precedent for someone saying that the war is over and, as a result, suddenly fierce fighting ends. The American Civil War – the bloodiest war in terms of American casualties that the U.S. has ever fought – ended because General Lee said it was over. And once he said it, suddenly it was over and soldiers on both sides stopped their operations.



There are also cases in which the end did not come so smoothly. The defeat of Germany in World War II required a full military invasion by the Allies. There was no one to say the War was over for Germany until it was over *de facto*.

What seems to be needed for nations to change directions sharply is a calamity (as experienced by Germany, Japan, and the American South) *and* a leader to make an announcement saying it was necessary. In some cases, however, even without a calamity on the scale experienced by Germany and Japan and the American South, a leader can create dramatic change. Think of Gorbachev's impact – both in the Soviet Union itself and in Eastern Europe more generally. (And note that in Gorbachev's case, just as in the case of the emperor, there was a near coup to stop him.)

For the U.S. after the Civil War, the next major calamity was the Great Depression of the 1930s. And big changes in national policy resulted from that event, voiced by a leader. Roosevelt was not able to end

¹ There were some cases of straggler Japanese soldiers who fought on for years. And there was a group of Japanese soldiers trapped in China that continued to fight after the War officially ended.

² You can hear the recording at http://cgi2.nhk.or.jp/shogenarchives/sp/movie.cgi?das_id=D0001410387_00000

the Depression, as his critics like to point out, but he did at least bottom it out. And it proved to be sufficient simply to persuade the electorate that he was doing his best to deal with it, among a cacophony of conflicting opinions on what should be done. Absent his leadership, the Depression could have evolved into something far worse, both economically and politically.

Compared to the circumstances above – major wars and the Great Depression - the Great Recession of 2008 and its aftermath may not seem to be a full-scale calamity. But for many displaced from jobs and incomes, it is. And an ongoing political war - which the Great Recession seems to have intensified - has paralyzed national economic decision making. Unfortunately, there is no one to say the war is over.