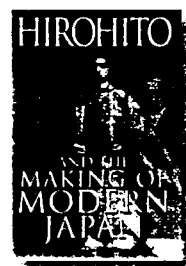


LESSER MAJESTY

A new book challenges the official history of Hirohito's wartime role: far from being a pacifist pawn, he was an eager participant

By TIM LARIMER TOKYO



ON DEC. 1, 1941, A WEEK before Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Emperor Hirohito was briefed by his cabinet and senior military leaders. He made the final decision to go to war against the United States that afternoon.

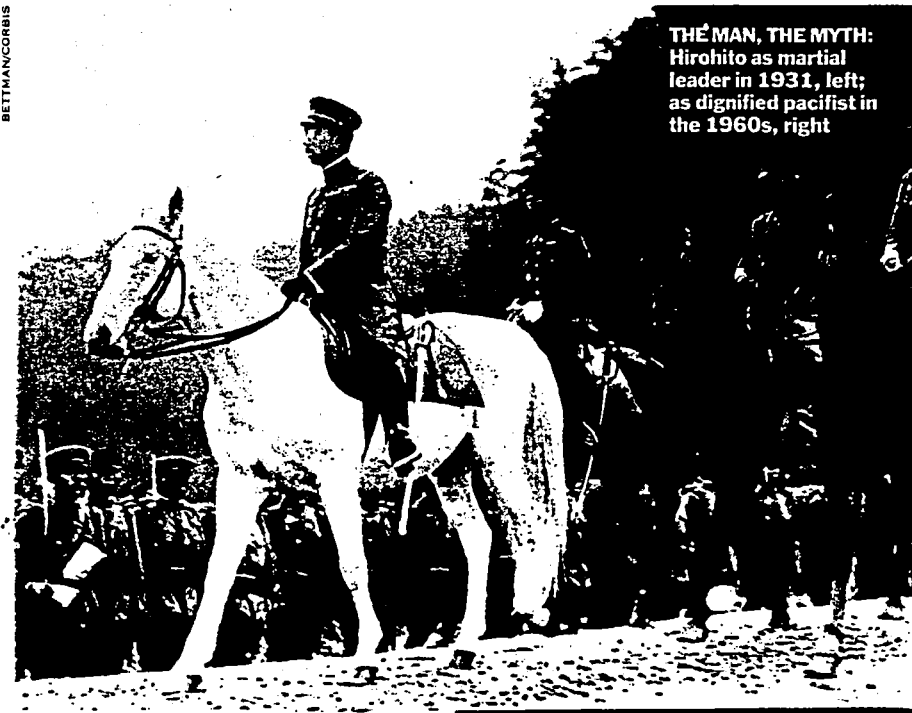
"The Emperor nodded in agreement to each explanation that was made and displayed not the slightest anxiety," Army Minister Sugiyama wrote in his diary. "He seemed to be in a good mood. We were filled with awe."

More than half a century after that fateful day, Japan remains unsure of what else Hirohito did—or didn't do—during the war that followed. Now comes American historian Herbert P. Bix with a new biography of the Emperor, which includes details of that Dec. 1, 1941 meeting, along with accounts of Hirohito's intimate involvement in planning Japan's march through China and Southeast Asia—and his postwar maneuvering to distance himself from the war. There have long been suspicions that Hirohito was a much more active monarch than Japan and the U.S. ever let on. Bix confirms that, using official records that will be difficult for the Emperor's apologists to refute. He

shows Hirohito's involvement in early strategic decisions as Japan's army marched through China. The Emperor refereed disputes between cabinet ministers, quizzed his military chiefs on their strategies and approved the plan to attack Pearl Harbor. What's likely to raise eyebrows on both sides of the Pacific are the accounts of how both

the U.S. and Hirohito's backers manipulated war records and altered witness testimony to protect him from implication in the Tokyo war-crimes trials. "A book like this gives the people a chance to think," says historian Yoshihiko Amino. "But it's not easy to change the hearts of the Japanese."

BETTMAN/GETTY IMAGES



THE MAN, THE MYTH: Hirohito as martial leader in 1931, left; as dignified pacifist in the 1960s, right

For decades the debate has centered on whether the Emperor was the mastermind of the war or merely a puppet. Was he an ineffectual bystander who simply went along with stronger generals who prosecuted the war and the atrocities related to it? Or was he more directly culpable, as the leader who had final legal and moral authority in Japan? The image of Hirohito as a pacifist patriot forms the core of Japan's modern orthodoxy. Challenging that notion within Japan can be risky, even life-threatening. "There is an irrational mentality about revering the Emperor," says Tadashi Koshiro, a respected historian retired from Komazawa University, who himself risks the ire of right-wing activists by making such a statement. Bix's revelations about Hirohito are sure to inflame those passions. Published this week in the U.S. by Harper Collins (no one in Japan has yet agreed to translate and publish the work), *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* relies on diaries, memoirs and war-era documents that have been unearthed in Japan since

the Emperor died in 1989. But does a debate over a deceased Emperor who presided over a war that ended before most Japanese citizens were born really matter anymore? In Japan's case, it does. Because so much about the war—and especially the atrocities associated with it—has never been candidly and definitively reported, or accounted for, a disputed record leaves Japan out of touch with its Asian neighbors over what is arguably the most crucial set of events of the 20th century. Many Asian governments still don't fully trust Tokyo because they suspect Japan doesn't really think it did anything wrong in World War II. Bix argues that setting the record straight on Hirohito will help Japan finally come to terms with the war and its aftermath. "Because Hirohito has not been held accountable," Bix told TIME, "Japan as a country has not taken responsibility, either." He writes: "Many Japanese, after all, had been complicit with him in waging war, and the nation as a whole came to feel that because the Emperor had not been held responsible, neither should they."

Old as it is, the Hirohito question remains relevant today as nations across the globe struggle with ways to hold leaders accountable for their governments' sins. From South Africa's apartheid regime to the war crimes of Bosnia to Pinochet's repression in Chile and the horrors of Pol Pot's Cambodia, the question of accountability looms large. That's partly what motivates Bix, a bespectacled, bicycle-riding grandfather who teaches at Tokyo's prestigious Hitotsubashi University. Bix devoted more than a decade to his research. "My book really is about the impunity system: when there is no punishment for an individual who has committed the crime, when the guilt or innocence is never adjudicated," he says. To Bix, the case of Hirohito set a precedent in the 20th century for the manner in which heads of state avoid scrutiny that could determine their culpability.

In Japan, some politicians are joining scholars like Bix in calling for a reassessment of the Emperor's wartime role. "The Hirohito diaries should be made public," says Diet member Taro Kono. "If I were Prime Minister today, I would push for that." Kono, to be fair, doesn't believe Hirohito was responsible for the war, but his attitude nonetheless departs strikingly from the standard political line that these matters were closed at the conclusion of the Tokyo trials in 1948. "We accepted the judgment," says Hisahiko Okazaki, a former senior Foreign Ministry official. "All our obligations

have been executed. There is no need to reopen this."

Still, a reevaluation of Hirohito—giving the Emperor new clothes—has been occurring in fits and starts through much of the last half-century. Other works have been criticized for their lack of scholarly authority or for a political agenda. Bix offers up a balanced account that neither paints Hirohito as a villain nor a saint, but as a flawed individual who nonetheless played a larger role in the war than has been officially recognized. Bix, 61, shows that

Hirohito was from an early age steeped in military training and prepared for a much more active role in governing than his father, a sickly and ineffectual Emperor. "He was not an evil man," Bix says of his subject. "He was a serious, studious young man. Becoming the real commander-in-chief was a gradual process, his authority grew over time... He was like a spider at the center of a web."

By the time the postwar trials were finished, the Emperor seemed more like a fly trapped helplessly in a web. General Douglas MacArthur and the U.S. occupying force decided Hirohito would be useful—alive, on the throne and with his reputation intact—in maintaining stability as Japan came to terms with living under the control of its enemy. Hirohito accepted a symbolic role in exchange for immunity. As Bix writes, he and his court entourage busily went about preparing his own war record to absolve himself of guilt. The trial prosecutors at times changed testimony that might have implicated Hirohito. "Bix's remarkable revelation is the degree to which Hirohito was willing to sell out his own people to save his own skin," says Chalmers Johnson, president of the Japan Policy Research Institute in California. Saburo Sakai, a wartime fighter pilot, now asks, "Who gave the orders for that stupid war?"

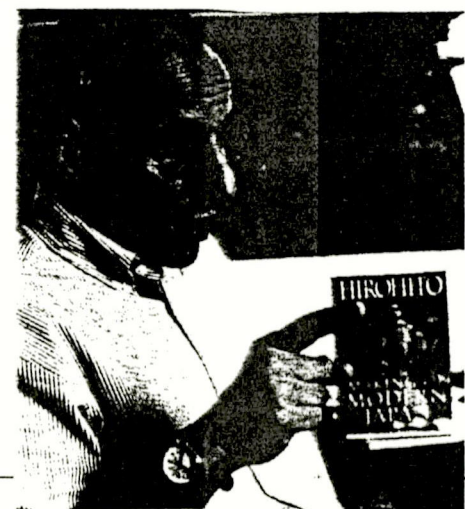
The cover-up was so successful that in Japan discussion of the Emperor and his role has been muted. Those who cast negative aspersions on the Emperor can face dire consequences. As Hirohito was dying, the mayor of Nagasaki said he believed "the



MR. NICE GUY Hirohito's postwar image as a kindly father figure, above, was manufactured to cover up his wartime sins, says author Bix, below

Emperor had responsibility for the war." Later he has shot by a right-winger in an assassination attempt; the mayor survived. Rare protests by anti-imperialists have been broken up by the police and the participants subjected to intense official investigations. Even outside officialdom, Hirohito has legions of defenders. "He loved peace," says Toshiaki Kawahara, an author and journalist who has written extensively about the Japanese royal family. "He was opposed to starting the Pacific War but the army was too strong. It was very hard for him to speak out in the atmosphere of the time. He had a mild personality, from beginning to end."

What's more, the effort to preserve the Emperor's pacifist image didn't end with his



death. Even today, the bureaucracy that controls—with an iron fist—information about the royals dictates to the press what photos can and cannot be published. For example, pictures of Hirohito in military uniform, as he was often portrayed during the war, are rarely seen in Japan. More typical are images from the postwar era, when Hirohito was depicted as a hobbyist consumed with marine biology or as a grandfatherly gentleman mugging it up at Disneyland with Mickey Mouse. (The Imperial Household Agency

did not respond to a faxed inquiry from TIME requesting comment about this story.)

Is Japan now ready for a more objective and honest reassessment of the Emperor? Just after his death, it appeared the nation would begin taking steps to account for the atrocities of war and atone for the sins of its soldiers. The new Emperor, Akihito, offered his "deepest regrets" in 1990 to visiting South Korean President Roh Tae Woo. In 1995, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama issued a formal apology to "the people in many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations." Then, as Japan remained mired in a long recession, politicians—particularly those of the immediate postwar generation—reverted to nationalistic ways and refused to apologize further for specific transgressions. "Wars happen," says Okazaki, the former diplomat. "There aren't good guys and bad guys like in Hollywood movies." Last week, Bix found out how sensitive the subject of Hirohito still is when he wanted to show a 1933 propaganda film. He was given permission but with one caveat: he could not show the portion of the film that has Hirohito, in military dress astride a white horse, inspecting the troops. "The taboo on the monarchy is still alive today," Bix says. Now, the hope is that a younger generation of politicians may be willing to take a more objective look back, even at the risk of upsetting a half century of orthodoxy. "Japan should have had some kind of investigation into what went wrong," says Diet member Kono, 37, whose father is Japan's current Foreign Minister. "What are we afraid of finding out?" What, indeed?

—With reporting by Donald Macintyre and Sachiko Sakamaki/Tokyo

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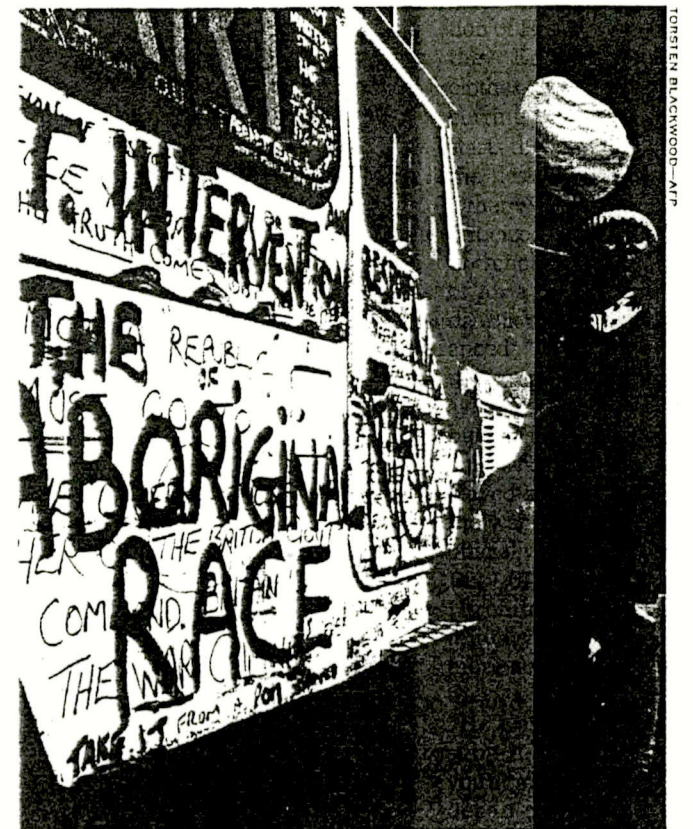
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