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Hiroshima Hoax: Japan's 'Wllingness to Surrender Before the Bomb

By [D.M. Giangreco](#)

In the mid 1960's, a growing distrust of government and sympathy for the Vietnam protest movement among American intellectuals revitalized the antinuclear "ban the bomb" campaign, which few had taken very seriously before, and spurred criticism of the use of atomic weapons to end World War II.

Since then, "enlightened opinion" has been dominated by a revisionism fueled by seductive tales of conspiracy in high places, unabashed fact bending, and manipulation of the historical record. Historian Robert James Maddox maintains in "The [Greatest Hoax In American History](#): Japan's Alleged Willingness to Surrender During the Final Months of World War II" (History News Network) that this is exactly what was done by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin in their Pulitzer Prize-winning [American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer](#).

From publication of his [The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War](#) in 1973 to [Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later](#) which came out in the midst of the brawl over the National Air And Space Museum's *Enola Gay* exhibit, Maddox, has minced, sliced, and diced the conspiracy theories that have evolved into conventional wisdom in some quarters. In "The Greatest Hoax," he states:

A staple of Hiroshima Revisionism has been the contention that the government of Japan was prepared to surrender during the summer of 1945, with the sole proviso that its sacred emperor be retained. President Harry S. Truman and those around him knew this through intercepted Japanese diplomatic messages, the story goes, but refused to extend such an assurance because they *wanted* the war to continue until atomic bombs became available. The real purpose of using the bombs was not to defeat an already-defeated Japan, but to give the United States a club to use against the Soviet Union. Thus Truman purposely slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Japanese, not to mention untold thousands of other Asians and Allied servicemen who would perish as the war needlessly ground on, primarily to gain diplomatic advantage.

One might think that compelling substantiation would be necessary to support such a monstrous charge, but the revisionists have been unable to provide a single example from Japanese sources. What they have done instead amounts to a variation on the old shell game. They state in their own prose that the Japanese were trying to surrender without citing any evidence and, to show that Truman was aware of their efforts, cite his diary entry of July 18 [1945] referring to a "telegram from Jap Emperor asking for peace."

There it is! The smoking gun! But it is nothing of the sort. The message Truman cited did not refer to anything even remotely resembling surrender. It referred instead to the Japanese foreign office's attempt (under the suspicious eyes of the military) to persuade the Soviet Union to broker a negotiated peace that would have permitted the Japanese to retain their prewar empire and their imperial system (not just the emperor) intact. No American president could have accepted such a settlement, as it would have meant abandoning the United States' most basic war aims.

Maddox describes a revealing exchange he had with Bird and Sherwin in the December 2007 issue of *Passport* (newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations) where he accused them of resorting to "semantic jugglery" in falsely equating Truman's diary reference to "peace" with "surrender," and pointedly noted that they had failed to provide "even a wisp of evidence" from Japanese sources that Japan was trying to surrender. Sherwin and Bird retorted that Maddox has ignored a "huge body of distinguished scholarship" yet neglected to provide a single example of this material. Instead, they lamely held up a recent book by another author, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's [*Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan*](#), as a shield to defend their own book, and castigated Maddox for ignoring Hasegawa.

Unfortunately for the Pulitzer winners, the Hasegawa book does not support their central contention. Said Maddox:

What Sherwin and Bird apparently did not know, or hoped their readers did not know, was that although Hasegawa agreed with revisionists on a number of issues, he explicitly rejected the early surrender thesis. Indeed, Hasegawa in no uncertain terms wrote that "Without the twin shocks of the atomic bombs and the Soviet entry into the war, the Japanese never would have surrendered in August."

Maddox relates that:

Undeterred by this fiasco and still unable to produce even a single document from Japanese sources, Bird has continued to peddle the fiction that "peace"

meant the same thing as "surrender." In a mostly contemptuous [review](#) of Sir Max Hastings's *Retribution: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45* (*Washington Post Book World*, April 20, 2008), Bird professed to be "appalled by the critical evidence left out."

This greatly amused [Stanley L. Falk](#), former chief historian of the US Air Force, who wrote in HNN's Comment section:

The nasty tone of Bird's review of Hastings may stem from the latter's unequivocal statement that "The myth that the Japanese were ready to surrender anyway has been so comprehensively discredited by modern research that it is astonishing some writers continue to give it credence." (p. xix)

The recently released [Hiroshima in History: The Myths of Revisionism](#), which is edited by Maddox, has received excellent reviews from an unusually wide array of sources -- [The Weekly Standard](#) to *The New Republic* to [The Times](#) of London (scroll down to the bottom [here](#)) -- and is a useful corrective to much of the nonsense that has been published on the end of the war and Truman's decision to drop the atom bomb. See also my own piece, [Was Dwindling US Army Manpower a Factor in the Atom Bombing of Hiroshima?](#) run earlier on HNN.



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