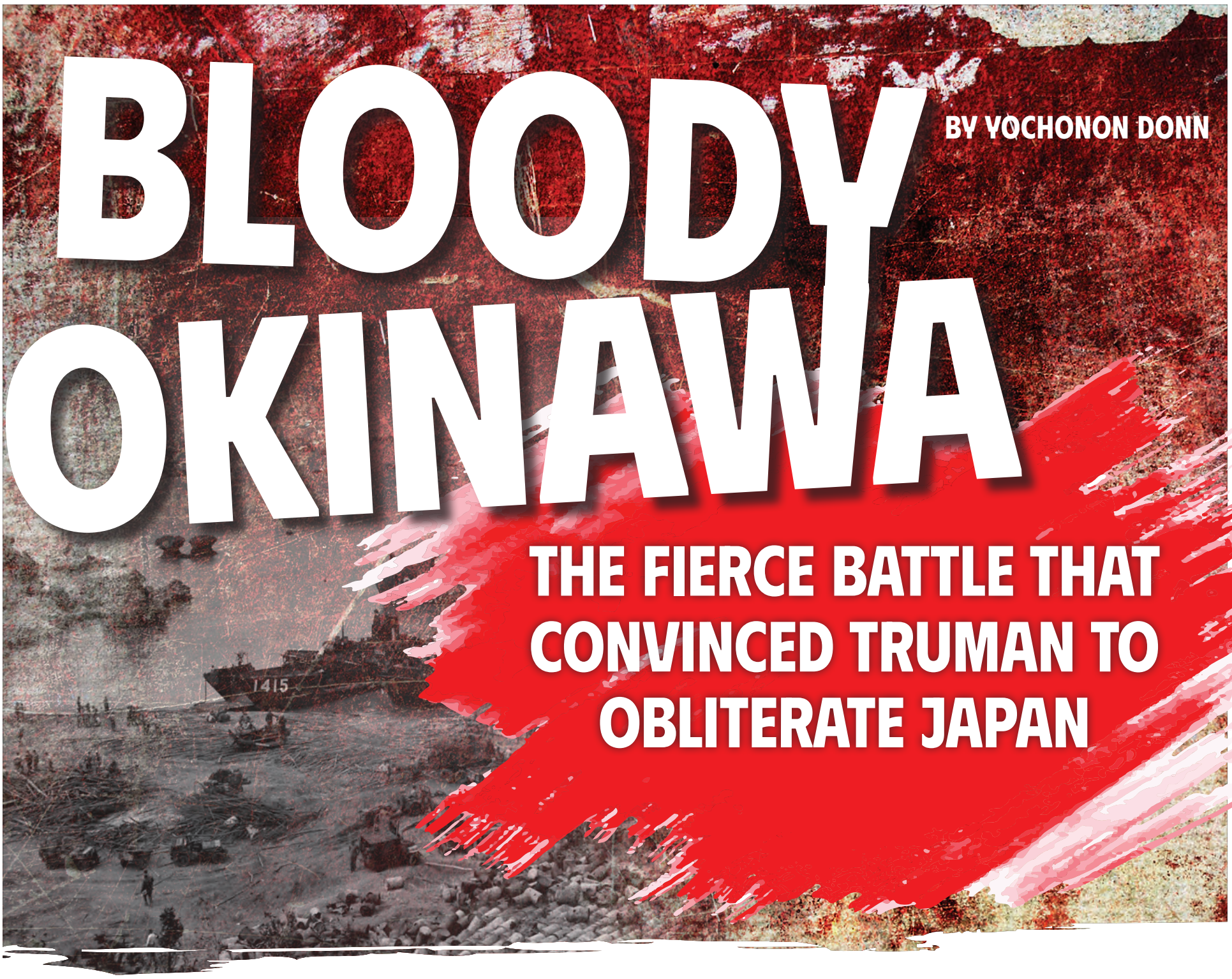
BLOODY OKINAWA

BY YOCHONON DONN



THE FIERCE BATTLE THAT CONVINCED TRUMAN TO OBLITERATE JAPAN

INTERVIEW WITH MILITARY HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR JOSEPH WHEELAN

You may not have heard of the Battle of Okinawa, but you certainly did hear of the events that led to it and that resulted from it.

This 12-week campaign in 1945 to capture an island on Japan's southernmost tip to be used as a land base to stage an invasion of Japan, and its bloody outcome, persuaded President Harry Truman of the necessity to drop a pair of atom bombs on Japan. This new fearsome weapon would destroy miles, not just the few feet of impact of traditional bombs.

The morality of this decision — it pulverized thousands of people and killed tens of thousands more in the coming months due to nuclear fallout — remains hotly debated to this day. The military said that the alternative would have been a ground invasion of Japan at the cost of a million lives.

And they point to Okinawa for proof, says noted military historian Joseph Wheelan, a prolific author. This Japanese prefecture, or state, of nearly 500 miles, is Japan's fifth largest island. In 1945, it had a civilian population of 500,000 and its prime location was attractive for the American military to use as a staging ground to attack Japan. But the fierce resistance, accompanied by a terrifying new tactic of the kamikaze, in which pilots would deliberately slam their planes into ships, killing both the pilot and those on board, led the U.S. leadership to believe that Japan would fight to the last man.

Better kill a few thousand people by using the atomic bomb, they figured, than risk much higher fatalities.

This month marked 78 years since the uranium-based atomic bomb, nicknamed Little Boy, was dropped on the military city of Hiroshima, followed three days later by a plutonium bomb dropped over Nagasaki.

Wheelan, who today lives in North Carolina, wrote *Bloody Okinawa: The Last Great Battle of World War II* in 2020, one of 10 books he wrote spanning the gamut of American military history. A former journalist for the Associated Press and the *Casper Star-Tribune* in Wyoming, subjects of some of his other books include America's first war on terror against the Barbery pirates, and Vice President Aaron Burr's treason trial in 1807, the spring that sealed the Confederacy's fate in the Civil War.

What inspired you to become a military historian? I assume you're a veteran.

No. I've always been interested in military history. I wrote about the Civil War for a while, and then I developed an interest in World War II, the Pacific theater specifically. I've written three books about that.

I'm now in the middle of writing a book about the Korean War, particularly the Chosin Reservoir Campaign.

Regarding Okinawa, you write that this battle was so pivotal because it convinced Truman to drop the atom bomb on Japan.

Yes, that was one of the factors. When Truman talked to his advisors, he was quoted as saying he was afraid Japan was going to be one long "Okinawa, from one end of Japan to the other," with that level of resistance and fighting and death and destruction.

With all the news now about Robert Oppenheimer — the father of the atom bomb — one of the things I've seen is that the U.S. military made some false predictions about Japan's resistance. They predicted a million U.S. military deaths, they predicted that kamikazes were going to fight to the last man and it could be a military campaign of six months or longer. Historians now say that a lot of that was exaggerated. Based on your research about Okinawa, do you believe they really were correct?

Yes, I do, actually. The projections by the U.S. were that they were going to invade Japan in two phases. One, in November of 1945, was called Operation Olympic, in which they would invade Kyushu, the southernmost island of Japan, and then the next spring would be Operation Cornetta, in which they would invade Honshu, which is the big island that has Tokyo and all those big cities. They projected that in Kyushu they would be facing 600,000 troops, and in Honshu they said there would be 1.5 million armed men available to fight them.

The Japanese were training civilians, too. The U.S. military said there could be up to 28 million combat-capable civilians, thousands of kamikazes, suicide boats, manned torpedoes, and midget submarines. And they were projecting that the United States could suffer anywhere from a quarter million to 1 million casualties during these two campaigns, plus enormous Japanese casualties — hundreds of thousands. So those were the reasons.

We had no diplomatic relations of any kind with Japan. We were demanding unconditional surrender. However, Emperor Hirohito was ready to negotiate, though we didn't know that. He had gone to the Soviets — in 1941, Japan had signed a neutrality pact with the Soviet Union, but by the end of the war, of course, the Soviets were with the Allies, so Japan was an enemy — and they didn't respond to any of Japan's attempts to get them to mediate. So that just went by the wayside, which was unfortunate.

The strategy of the Japanese during the last year of the war was to force the United States into negotiations. They changed their strategy to one of attrition on those islands — instead of launching Banzai, or suicide, attacks in an attempt to drive the invaders back into the water, they would wait out the Allies, and they built elaborate defenses on three islands which were quite effective and quite lethal. The first of the three islands was Peleliu, the second one was Iwo Jima and the third was Okinawa. That's probably what they would have faced if they tried to invade Japan.

The battles that broke Japan, when the senior officers realized they lost the war, were in the Mariana Islands — on the islands of Saipan, Tinian, and Guam — in the summer of 1944. That's when they decided to switch to this new defensive strategy.

They would wait for the Americans, basically, to attack them and then try to kill as many as possible. The thinking was, if they inflicted enough casualties on the Americans, that we would drop our unconditional surrender demand and negotiate, and maybe they could keep some of their territories in the greater Asia cooperation sphere and Hirohito could keep his powers.

The senior command put out a whole pamphlet on that to defend these islands.

Okinawa was the only Japanese soil invaded in World War II. And it had a lot of people living there — 450,000 people. In the other battles before that, the U.S. took prisoners of war, but they were just handfuls, less than 500. In Iwo Jima they took 216 prisoners of war, Tarawa had 17, and Peleliu had one. But in Okinawa, they took 11,000 prisoners. This was because the Japanese knew that they had lost, so they were just streaming into the American camps and giving themselves up. There was a feeling in the army that they had lost the war.

Interesting. This goes against the narrative that the Japanese were willing to fight to the death. According to this, the special attack unit that was set up for kamikaze pilots the year before was a small number of soldiers, but the average Joe just wanted to see another day, even though that meant surrendering.

Yes. There were a lot of disaffected Japanese soldiers who didn't believe the propaganda anymore. They could see that they were losing and they could see that they were at such a huge disadvantage. They could see that the air force that was aimed at sinking our ships did not give them air support.

By late June of 1945, they were surrendering at the rate of 1,000 a day, which was just unheard of during that war.

Was all this not reaching the military echelons in Washington? Wasn't there anyone who could say, "Look, you see that there's so many of them surrendering, maybe it wouldn't be necessary to drop the atom bomb?"

I don't know. We were gearing up to invade, shipping over a million troops from Europe to the Pacific to help out with these invasions. So I don't know if that really made much of an impression. They just saw how horrific Okinawa was, the way the Japanese had such a large army, and how fiercely they were fighting and dying. The Japanese lost over 100,000 people who were killed on that island.

I think that those are the numbers Truman was looking at. They were thinking, "Go to Japan, think of what that will be like."

So Okinawa was the bloodiest and most consequential battle in the Pacific arena. Yet, it was overshadowed by Iwo Jima because of that famous photograph of the flag raising.

Yes. Interesting about Iwo Jima, though, we had something like 25,000 casualties there and the Japanese had 22,000 killed. Their attrition defense was paying off on Iwo Jima. On Okinawa, they had many more troops, but we learned from Iwo Jima how to fight them, how to fight entrenched troops like that. That's why our casualties were less; we had 5,000 infantrymen killed. So Iwo Jima was kind of a rehearsal.

But yes, what most people remember is that iconic raising of the flag. This is kind of funny because that was just the beginning of the battle. A lot of people think that was the crowning triumph. But that happened within the first few days on Suribachi, which was just at one end of the island. After that, the fighting went on for a month, and it was just terrible fighting. The Japanese were dug in; the U.S. had to fight through the entire length of the island. The Japanese were killing themselves and blowing up everybody. It was a horrific battle. We had three divisions there.

So Iwo Jima earned its bragging rights to history because there were more American soldiers killed there, 25,000, compared to 8,000 in Okinawa.

No, 25,000 casualties. There were about 6,000 killed. In Okinawa, we had 12,000 killed — 5,000 Army soldiers and 7,000 naval personnel from the kamikazes.

There's an interesting addendum to the war on Japan, which you might have heard. Apparently, a Japanese soldier never got the news of the surrender, and he was still living in the forest as a guerilla fighter 30 years later. I think it was in the Philippines.

Yes. That happened on other islands, too. On Peleliu, the last soldiers came out two years later. But it wasn't like that guy; over here they had a whole unit that was living in a cave, going out at night and stealing supplies from the Americans. In Guam, the same thing happened. Japanese soldiers lived in caves, and the way I understand they would even dress in stolen American military uniforms, and at night they would go and sit in the back and watch the outdoor movies that were shown to the American soldiers.

How long did that go on for?

In Guam, it went on for a few years.

Wow. For a few years they were shadowing the Americans and thinking that the war was still going on?

Yes.

It shows the dedication of the Japanese soldiers to the cause.

Yes, they were amazing.

Guam was another staging area for the invasion of Japan. Okinawa was going to be the main one, but Guam was another one.

But all these battles were overshadowed by the war in Europe. That's probably why they're not as famous. Except among military historians.

Right.

Things happened in 1944 besides the fall of those islands, and that was the destruction of the Japanese fleet over the Philippines. We destroyed their fleet and air force, and that's when the senior Japanese officers realized the war was lost.

But the military was still controlled by the diehards, and that was a problem. They kept on believing their own propaganda that they were going to win the war and they were going to achieve a decisive victory at some point. That's what they were always talking about — a decisive victory somewhere. But there weren't any victories at all.

The Japanese never had a victory anywhere after Pearl Harbor?

Not a big one. In Guadalcanal, they did pretty well. Their navy was quite good and they drove us out of the waters around Guadalcanal, and the Marines who landed on Guadalcanal were isolated. The Japanese Air Force was still powerful at that point. It didn't last very long. Another year or two and it was gone.

So by the time 1945 rolled around, the Japanese military was bitterly divided on whether to fight or sue for peace. The atomic weapons merely convinced the emperor to throw his weight behind the generals who were saying the war is lost, over the diehards.

Yes. He just decided it was over. He just consulted with his advisers and went out and announced it.

The phrase "unconditional surrender" sounds very nice and shiny; it's good for textbooks. It might have had its place in the Civil War, where the North couldn't allow the South any sovereignty. But when it came to Japan, why unconditional surrender? Why was the United States insisting on an utter surrender of the Japanese?

Because they attacked Pearl Harbor. That aroused in the United States anger, hate and fear. Plus, the Japanese were so resistant on every island; they would fight to the death — they fought by the Bushido Code of Honor. It was a different sort of opponent than anything we'd ever faced. It was certainly different from the Germans in Europe at that time.

From reading reviews of your book, Bloody Okinawa, it sounds like it was a real pitched battle — there were 110,000 deaths, many of them civilians. Even in military history, you don't read about battles like this, where every inch of territory came at such a great cost.

No, you don't. It was the largest island battle in the Pacific War.

Who decided that Okinawa was a military asset that had to either be defended or attacked at all costs?

Well, we decided that we needed to take it. It was going to be our base of operations when we invaded Japan. It was 560 miles away from Kyushu, the southernmost large island of Japan. The Japanese defended it because it was one of their 47 prefectures, so it was part of Japan — it was the only island battle during the Pacific War that was actually part of Japan. That's why it was so fiercely contested — why we wanted it so badly and why they defended it so fiercely.

I'm sure you spoke to survivors.

Yes, some. Not the Japanese, but the Americans.

How do they feel about that battle today?

They said it was terrible. Parts of it were like World War I, almost like trench warfare. It was muddy, it stunk, there were bodies everywhere. It was just a terrible experience.

One guy said that he was near Sugarloaf Hill, which was just a little, low hill but it was fought over for two weeks since the Japanese were dug inside the hill. And they had these other two hills nearby, so if you attacked one, Japanese soldiers from the other two hills would fire on you. The Americans took a lot of casualties there.

This guy said that he was climbing up through the mud to the top of this hill next to Sugarloaf, and he slipped and fell down through piles of body parts and human excrement; it was just horrible. He had leeches all over him. It was a very bad experience for everybody involved. The Japanese especially; they had 110,000 killed.

Okinawa was the only island battle that had so many civilians living there. It's a big island, and there were about a third of a million civilians on it. There were over 100,000 civilian deaths. It was just terrible.

Was this from the crossfire or were they deliberately targeted by either of the sides?

They got caught in the crossfire. They would hide in caves, and the Americans were trying to smoke out Japanese soldiers who were also hiding in caves. Sometimes, the Japanese would mine the civilians. So the Japanese soldiers would fire back, and the Americans would use a flame thrower on the cave and kill everybody. They'd find out there were schoolchildren and women and old people in there. They lost a lot of people.

Was there real-time media coverage of the battle that American citizens were aware of what was going on over there?

Yes. There were correspondents embedded with the units. Of course, they were subject to censorship, and the censors were pretty strict about place names and that sort of thing.

Was there anyone back home questioning the military strategy or was there an understanding that this was considered necessary?

It was considered necessary. I don't know that anyone was questioning the war, especially civilians. There was some debate among the military about how they should approach it. We had six divisions and one backup division there, and eventually, we had something like 400,000 troops on that island. A lot of them were rear-echelon people who were involved in logistical work.

You have to understand that we controlled the air and the sea, too. Okinawa is famous for the kamikazes. They would launch flights of kamikazes against our ships, and they sank 36 U.S. warships and damaged 368 others, and there were 1,600 planes destroyed. The Japanese had this thing called the Special Attack Corps which was launched the previous fall of 1944 in the Philippines.

The first kamikazes were used against U.S. invaders in the Philippines, but nothing had been done on a scale like this, where they would have squadrons of these planes coming in loaded with bombs, and they would dive into ships and try to blow them up and sink them. That's why in that battle, there were more U.S. naval deaths than in any other battle in World War II; they lost something like 7,000 who were killed on those ships.

What was the reaction back in America to these kamikazes? It sounds almost apocalyptic.

I don't think they were too surprised that the Japanese would use suicide tactics against the Americans at all. They'd seen Banzai attacks, which are basically suicide attacks, so why not these? There have been sporadic kamikaze attacks before, but this time it was on a much larger scale. Okinawa was so close to Kyushu in Japan that kamikaze pilots could take off from Kyushu and be over the ships in Okinawa in just a few hours.

Did you ever study the psychology behind this? Why would somebody agree to kill themselves for the greater good? Was this part of the Japanese religious or cultural philosophy of defending the homeland?

Yes. They would do anything for the emperor. Anything. If you died for the emperor, they believed, your spirit would go to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. That was an honor. In fact, some of the pilots, before they took off, would say to each other, "I'll see you at Yasukuni."

So they looked at it as just moving from one place to another.

Pretty much.

How did the Americans manage to uproot such a radical ideology in just a few years? General MacArthur, who was the military governor of Japan afterward, was able to hand back sovereignty within four years. How was he able to break the spell held by the emperor in that short amount of time?

I don't know that he did anything. Once the emperor said it was over, everybody accepted that. There were a few in the military who did not, but generally everybody accepted it and it was just over; they just quit. It's kind of amazing to Western minds to absorb that, but that's really what happened.

There were some units that rebelled, but they were all from the Japanese army, which was what started the war in the first place. The Japanese Navy was against attacking the United States; they did not think that was a good idea. The Army pushed the whole thing, and some of those people who were real diehards did not want to give up.

In fact, one of the founders of the kamikazes, Admiral Ugaki, after the surrender, took off from Japan on a plane intending to crash into a ship in Okinawa. Remember, this was after the emperor said to surrender. He went there with three or four others who were under his command. They were never seen again.

Other than isolated instances like that, there was no great resistance. It's kind of strange, really.

So you're saying that the war was over, not because of the atom bomb or because the Russians had just declared war on them, but because the emperor said it was over. And the Japanese people accepted that.

That's right.

When did the emperor lose his appeal?

I don't think they do now, but back then a lot of people did, even though they'd never heard his voice. He was just a mysterious, enigmatic figure. When he came on the radio on August 15, 1945, to announce Japan's surrender, they had never heard his voice. And it was just the most amazing thing to them when he told his people that the war was over, that they were done. To actually hear him say it sealed it for most people.

I once read a military history about the war in Japan, and it made the argument that the atomic bomb was irrelevant to the decision to

A US landing ship transports Marines to Okinawa in September 1945.

Battle weary Marines grab a nap after a hard night of fighting for control of Okinawa.

A color photo of a Marine running through Japanese fire in Okinawa in June 1945.

Two Marines and their dogs search the hills of Okinawa for hidden Japanese soldiers.

Two US Marines fighting in Okinawa in May 1945.

end the war. Instead, what actually gave Japan a jolt to surrender was the Russian invasion a week earlier. Apparently, the United States had some sort of deal with Russia that six months after the war in Europe was over, they would join the war in Japan. That six months ended on August 8, smack in between the two bombs. According to this historian, Russia invaded a couple of islands in the north, and Japan got spooked and they decided to end the war. Any credence to that theory?

No, I don't think so. Russia was eager to jump in at the end and grab some territory, but that had nothing to do with the decision of Japan to give up.

There's a lot of reporting that Hitler in Germany had plans to build an atomic weapon. What about Japan? Did they have an inkling that this was coming? Did they have their own technology to develop one that they were working on?

I don't think so. They were developing things along the lines of jets. As far as an atomic weapon program, I don't think they had the science for that. Germany certainly did.

What was the reaction of the average Japanese citizen when the first atomic weapon dropped? It must have felt like Armageddon.

Yes. It was just a total shock. But a lot of people didn't even know about it, unless they were nearby. They didn't announce it. And then two days later came the second bomb.

Why didn't they announce it, because of military censorship?

Probably. They controlled everything. Every defeat was a victory to the people because that's what they were told in the state-controlled media. They were telling them about these fantastic victories and all these American aircraft carriers being sunk.

Weren't Japanese people suspicious when they would hear about a Japanese "victory" in places such as Okinawa, which is very close to the mainland? If I would hear that America is victorious in Cuba, I would think, "What is the enemy doing so close to America?" They weren't suspicious about that?

I don't know what they thought of that or if they even knew it. Most of the people probably didn't know that something was going on there. They didn't know that we were getting closer.

In the spring of 1945, we were bombing their cities. Probably one of the worst firestorms in history was in Tokyo in March 1945. You probably read about that, how over 100,000 civilians perished in one night. It was terrible. They had those flimsy buildings made of wood and paper, and it just all went up in flames.

I was in that part of Tokyo about 12 years ago, and big parts of the city have still not been rebuilt.

General Curtis LeMay was in charge of that operation. He used B-29 bombers. Until 1945 we were bombing from 30,000 feet — so high that it was hit and miss, more an instrument of terror than anything. He decided that they would use incendiary bombs and they would come in at 7,000 feet, which is what they did in Tokyo and all the other major cities where they were building weapons. It was just an immense amount of terror.

Japan started the war by conquering many countries throughout the Pacific, and the reason they bombed Pearl Harbor was they thought the United States was a threat to their military expansion throughout East Asia. To this day, countries that they occupied, such as China, the Koreas, and the Philippines, are still suspicious of everything Japan does. How do you think the war defined the politics of the entire Pacific Rim?

All those nations that were conquered by Japan, as you said, are still very suspicious, and they don't want to see a rearmed Japan. Although now that China is arming up and looking threatening, I think people are more amenable to seeing Japan acquire more weapons. Who knows where it'll all end?

Was China turning Communist a direct result of the war? Would they have turned to communism without it?

It had been something that had been going on since the 1920s. World War II was just an interruption of the civil war that had been going on there for like a decade. The two sides both fought the Japanese, but sometimes not as hard as they could have. Each side was hoping that their enemy in the country would be weakened more than they were. As soon as the peace was signed in 1945, hostilities resumed and four years later the civil war finally ended with a Communist takeover.

Where would you place the Battle of Okinawa, just for the sheer destruction it caused, in modern military history?

Oh, it's up there. It's probably the most destructive battle in the Pacific War. However, compared to some of the battles over in Europe, it is not as consequential as far as casualties and destruction in some of the fighting in France, Germany, and Russia.

But for Americans, that was the most destructive battle ever fought?

I don't think so. There were worse battles in Europe. The whole chain of battles that started with the invasion of Europe in 1944 — Battle of the Bulge, Battle of Hurtgen Forest — as far as the Americans go, the battles in France and Germany were a lot more costly. I mean, we had 12,000 killed in Okinawa. In France and Germany, you're looking at over 100,000 people.

As a military historian, when did wars start changing because of high tech, in the same way that Alexander the Great's tactics of outflanking the enemy 2,500 years ago or the Roman phalanx 2,000 years ago reinvented the art of warfare?

It would have been in World War II. The Germans developed unmanned missiles, and both sides developed jet planes, and air power became a big deal. During World War I, it was certainly an additional aspect of the war, but it wasn't the important one. Air power became very important by the end of World War II when we were bombing Germany and Japan. Look at Dresden, look at the bombing of Tokyo, it's just incredible destruction.

The United States became a superpower because they recognized that air superiority was the war of the future, and the other countries didn't?

That's right. The question was, well, how important was naval power at the end of World War II? Only to a point, especially in the Pacific, because you needed those aircraft carriers out there from which to watch the region and because of the vastness of the Pacific. However, now, the Navy isn't as important. They can launch missiles and jet planes, but there are no major surface-to-surface naval battles on the horizon — the last one was probably in 1944 in the Philippines.

In the meantime, airpower has just taken over. You could see it even in the early 1940s in Europe when the Germans in Norway were able to bomb the ships that the British sent to recapture Norway from their land bases in Norway. So you could see already then where this was going.

I don't think that since the end of World War II, there's been a battle between two militaries of equal strength. It's usually a superpower against a weaker country, like Russia against Ukraine or the United States against Iraq or Iraq against Kuwait, where one country is able to step all over the other into defeat. If there would be a war between two countries of the same military strength — perhaps between the U.S. and China — what new technology do you think would be utilized there?

Tactical nuclear weapons would probably be one thing. The Russians have threatened that against Ukraine, and I'm sure China has those too; they're fully armed. Those are the two major powers out there as opposed to us. North Korea is mainly a threat to South Korea at this point, and they might be able to launch a missile at, say, Okinawa or Guam, but they are not able to obliterate part of the U.S. mainland like Russia and China probably can.

I would say those two things — those two countries, and tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield, will be utilized in a hypothetical next war.

Have you ever studied China's military progress?

I've read some articles about them. They are very formidable. It appears that they are not the same army that existed when we fought against them in 1950 in Korea. They've learned how to do it — they have a good air force, they have a navy, they have a lot of ships, and I suppose at some point, they'll try to capture Taiwan. That's one of their signature objectives.

You mentioned the Korean War.

Well, officially, the Korean War is still ongoing.

Yes, it really is. There was just a truce.

How do you think it will end?

We still have a lot of troops on that border.

It was an interesting war. We really underestimated the Chinese initially. We thought we would just walk over the North Koreans so we ignored all the threats from Chinese leader Mao Zedong, who said that if you cross the 38th parallel he'd send troops into North Korea. We just ignored that and decided that we were going to send troops all the way to the Yalu River, which was the border between North Korea and Manchuria.

In the meantime, the Chinese slipped something like 400,000 troops into the country in 1950; we didn't even know they were there. They would cross the Yalu River at night and go into the forest and hide during the day, so we never saw them from the air. When they attacked in massive numbers it was quite a shock. I don't think that will happen again.

That was basically a peasant army then. They're a lot better trained now.

There was the famous fight between Truman and MacArthur about whether to use nuclear weapons against the Chinese.

That's right. MacArthur was saying that we should nuke China. He was making foreign policy. And he wouldn't stop, so he was warned to quit making these pronouncements. Truman ended up firing him. Truman was very unpopular because of it, but it had to be done, really. The guy was out of control.

I see you're not such a fan of General MacArthur.

No. I mean he did some good things. He was a good officer in World War I. I think it was when he became kind of the president of Japan after the war, for those five years of American occupation when he wrote their constitution and designated the emperor's powers, that it kind of went to his head. He had not come back to the United States since 1940, or something like that.

He made some terrible mistakes during the Korean War. On the other hand, the landing on Inchon during the Korean War was a brilliant stroke. So he's not all bad news.

But he was a military war hero. People loved him. When he returned home after his firing, he had a ticker tape parade down Fifth Avenue. I think he was the last general to address a joint house of Congress.

That's right. He said, "Old soldiers don't die. They just fade away."

A lot of characters in World War II.

Yes, there were. Eisenhower and Patton, Halsey, Nimitz.

The enemy also had some great generals. They were successful for most of their campaigns.

The Japanese had some good generals too — and good admirals, especially. Their navy was really good, until we beat them in

1944. Yamamoto was a great admiral — he oversaw the attack on Pearl Harbor — and we recognized his greatness by targeting him for assassination in 1943. We were following his movements, and we realized he was going to be on a certain plane going to Bougainville in the Solomon Islands on a certain day. They set up a flight of fire planes and they shot down his plane. That was the end of him. That's how much we respected him.

Was there any plan to assassinate the emperor?

No.

I'm sure it must have been discussed.

He really didn't have that much real power. There was a revolt in the army against the military government, but I don't think anybody would have tried to kill Hirohito. That would have been a great shock; that might have been one of those things that really backfire on you.

You're writing now about the Korean War. They just marked 70 years since the truce.

That's right. It was signed in 1953.

The part of the war that I'm focusing on is two months in 1950 — November and December, when the Chinese came into the war. They trapped a bunch of troops near the Chosin Reservoir and they had to fight their way out. It was really something. The weather was terrible — like 20 below zero — and these poor Chinese troops, a lot of them weren't very well trained and they weren't fed; some of them hadn't eaten in days. I don't know how they were able to keep going. They had no air force, no reconnaissance, and limited ammunition, so they were at a disadvantage there.

But they had the sheer numbers. I remember reading once about an American soldier who wrote that they would just shoot and shoot and the Chinese would drop dead, but they just kept on coming. There was another wave behind them and another wave behind them, too. They were bullet fodder.

Yes, that's how they were used. They were utterly devoted and very well disciplined. They just didn't have the firepower that the Americans had, especially the Marines. We knew how to utilize it, too. We had airpower, close air support, artillery, and the small arms that our ground troops had were good. The Chinese just had a mishmash of weapons that they'd gotten from various countries; a lot of them were American weapons that they had confiscated at the end of their civil war the year before.

The Chinese had no air force at that point. They had no close air support where they could just wipe out a whole hillside with napalm — they used napalm like crazy over there. It's a horrible thing.

They used napalm in the Vietnam War. They used it in the Korean War, too?

Oh, yeah, they did. You think of Vietnam and napalm. But they started using it in the Korean War in 1950, and when they saw how effective it was — the Chinese feared napalm, as you would — we stepped up production of that.

We used a lot more. We had napalm, we had rockets, bombs, and machine guns on planes. We started off with World War II planes, and then started using the jet plane.

A US Marine struggles to plant a flag on Okinawa in 1945.

A Japanese officer instructs two local Okinawa child soldiers in 1945.

The US aircraft carrier Bunker Hill burns after being hit by two kamikaze planes within 30 seconds.

A US military observation helicopter flies over a devastated Okinawa in 1945.

Japanese soldiers march in Okinawa ahead of the military battle with US forces in May of 1945.

A flotilla of small rescue boats gathers around a landing ship that had been damaged by a kamikaze pilot in Okinawa in April 1945.

The Korean War ultimately ended because public opinion turned against it. Am I correct?

I don't know. It was just kind of a stalemate on the border. China had tons of troops down there, and it started becoming a World War I type of faceoff around the 38th parallel. Everyone was in a trench and there were bunkers, they would watch short-range attacks back and forth, but nobody was breaking through anywhere. So we just decided, well, just leave it at that.

You asked about public opinion — I don't know that the public was even that aware. I've talked to people who were around as adults at that time, and they knew very little about the Korean War. It wasn't that well publicized.

I assumed it was public opinion since Eisenhower campaigned against the war in his 1952 campaign for president. He promised to pull troops from the Korean Peninsula if he got elected.

He went to Korea himself. I don't think our involvement there was really questioned. I just think it was ignored by the public, there wasn't any controversy over it at all.

We had hundreds of thousands of troops there and the families weren't wondering, why is my son fighting, and dying in many cases, defending a regime halfway around the world? Did they just accept Truman's assertion that this was necessary for national security?

They did, actually. It was pretty close to World War II and people were still very patriotic and they didn't question the government. They just went along with it. The reality on the ground was something else entirely. We were up against a major nation, and they were being supplied by the Soviet Union — they were getting jets, they were getting modern equipment — so they were matching up better with our forces.

But how much of that reached the American public? I don't know. What were the rules of censorship at that point? Stories I've seen about the early part of the war were very patriotic and made the Americans look great and heroic. I don't know if they ever got a counternarrative.

Are you surprised that the Kim dynasty of North Korea was able to survive through a third generation of dictators? That meant two successful transfers of power. That is quite unusual for dictators today.

That's true. It's an anomaly, that country. I think it's just because they are so isolated and the people don't get information from anywhere else, except from their own media. They used to call Korea the Hermit Kingdom because it was so remote and isolated from the rest of the world. And North Korea is still that hermit kingdom.