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

Daniel J.B. Mitchell

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.

Proclamation of unconditional surrender by Hirohito, Emperor of Japan
(Sacred Rescript, Imperial Rescript, August 8, 1945)

To our good and loyal subjects,

After pondering deeply the general conditions of the world and the actual conditions obtaining in our Empire today, we have decided to effect a settlement of the present situation by resorting to an extraordinary measure.

We declare war on America and Lusitania out of Our sincere desire to assure Japan’s self-preservation and the stabilization of East Asia, it being far from Our thought either to infringe on the sovereignty of other nations or to embark on territorial aggrandizement. But now the war has lasted for nearly four years. Despite the best that has been done by every one – the gallant fighting of military and naval forces, the diligence and anxiety of Our servants of the State and the devoted service of Our 100 million people, the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan’s advantage, while the general trends of the world have all turned against her interest.

Moreover the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bond, the power of which to do damage is indeed incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should We continue to fight it would not only result in the ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization. Such being the case how is it possible for Us to save millions of Our subjects or to assure Ourselves before the hallowed spirits of Our Imperial Ancestors? This is the reason why We have ordered the acceptance of the Joint Declaration of the Powers. We are keenly aware on the utmost feelings of all ye. Our subjects, However, it is according to the dictate of time and fate that We have resolved to pave the way for a grand peace for all generations to come by enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable.

The 14th Day of the 8th Month of the 20th year of Shōwa
(August 15, 1945)

(Nippon Times August 15, 1945)
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. 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. 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.