

# Emperor (2013)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V-2 ; L-5 ; S/N-2 . Running time: 1 hour 45 min.

*Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;  
bind them round your neck,  
write them on the tablet of your heart.  
Proverbs 3.3*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children  
of God.  
Matthew 5:9*

The name of General Douglas Gen MacArthur and Fellers MacArthur probably does not arrive in Tokyo. spring to mind when we think of peacemakers—in stead, we think of Gandhi or Nobel laureates such as Martin Luther King, Jr. And who even knows the name of Brigadier General Bonner Fellers? Director Peter Webber's new film suggests that these two men, both dedicated warriors of World War Two, also deserve to be welcomed into the company of men and women Christ called "children of God" because of what they did to bring war-ruined Japan back to its feet during the weeks immediately following the war.

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When the plane carrying General Douglas MacArthur (well played by Tommy Lee Jones) arrives at a Tokyo airport, everyone fears that the Japanese troops in the greeting party might not be

peaceable. Having seen how fanatical they had resisted during the invasion of the Pacific islands, might they not shoot them? When his aide Brigadier General Bonner Fellers (Matthew Fox) is asked about this, Fellers assures MacArthur that the troops are loyal to their emperor and because he had ordered the surrender, they need not fear. MacArthur, taking off his own side arm, tells his entourage to take off theirs also as he says, "Let's show them good old fashioned American swagger." As the film unfolds, we see that Gen. Fellers is the expert on Japan whom the Supreme Commander relies on heavily. Immediately there is a seemingly ominous incident that fills the Americans with unease, showing the great cultural divide between conqueror and vanquished., As the Americans are driven toward the city—the country side is a blacked area of bombed out homes and charred human bones, no trees to be seen—the armed Japanese soldiers lining the road do an about face so that their backs are turned to the General's convoy. This is not a show of contempt, Feller assures them, but of respect for the Supreme Commander. Thus they had done for the Emperor whenever he had driven by because they believed him to be a god whom they were not worthy to gaze upon.

Establishing his head quarters in a building opposite the gate of Emperor Hirohito's palace grounds, MacArthur orders the round up of all the chiefs of the wartime government. All must be arrested at the same hour to prevent them from committing mass hari kari to escape from the shame of a public trial and probably hanging. Once this is accomplished (with just three succeeding in killing themselves, and former Prime Minister Tojo botching his attempt), MacArthur gives Fellers the task of investigating Emperor Hirohito's guilt or innocence. The President having removed the emperor's name from "the protected list," "Washington" has given them 10 days to decide whether to try and hang the ruler considered by his people as a god or to allow him to continue to reside in his palace but shorn of his power. Fellers protests that this is not nearly enough time, but his boss insists they keep to the timetable.

During their conversations we discover MacArthur's contempt for his civilian superiors back in Washington, as well as his ambition to replace Truman as the next President.

As Fellers and his men track down the evasive Japanese officials for interrogation, the film shifts back and forth between his awesome task and his past relationship with Aya Shamida, a student in America with whom he had fallen in love many years before and then met again in Japan just before the war broke out. He had been sent from his post in the Philippines to write a paper on the psychology of the Japanese soldier. Now a school teacher, she is not pleased that he had gone to her school, the public having been stirred up to hate Americans. He follows her to the country estate of her uncle, an army general who proceeds to instruct his guest in the code of honor and respect that is interwoven throughout Japan's history and society. Although largely fictional, this sub-story helps explain how Fellers had come to know the enemy so well—not just “know,” but also to respect them. It is this attitude plus the smattering of Japanese language that he uses whenever he meets an official that leads some of the wary officials to cooperate with him.

MacArthur's dilemma is that justice, as the US President and most of the public saw it, demanded that the Emperor be tried and executed along with Prime Minister Tojo, but that if they did this, the Japanese people, so loyal to their Emperor, might rise up in a bloody revolution. How Gen. Fellers and his boss work this out makes for splendid drama, and for Hollywood, a doctored history lesson (more on this later). Gen. MacArthur is shown in all his egotism, courage, and, ultimately, wisdom, clearly the right man to deal with a proud but defeated enemy that knew little at that time of the workings of democracy.

Scriptwriters Davis Klass and Vera Blasi, drawing from Shiro Okamoto's book take many liberties with history. The actual investigation went on for five months, not the impossible ten

days in the film; and the love story itself was made up. I suspect the latter was inserted both to interest lovers of romance and also to help explain how Fellers gained his knowledge of Japanese culture. For some critics this weakens the film, but I believe there are enough strong points in the film to make it well worth seeing. The note of ambiguity at the end suggests that the facts of a historical event cannot always be pinned down. Whether or not Emperor Hirohito (Takataro Kataoka) had the power and the desire to participate in the 1941 decision to attack Pearl Harbor, his involvement in the surrender process that ended the war is indisputable. Against the wishes of his militarist advisers he did record his short speech ordering his people to lay down their arms and surrender to the United States after the two atomic bombs attacks. This act saved thousands of lives, both American and Japanese. There was a brief rebellion to find and destroy the document, but it failed. The Emperor's unprecedented trip to meet MacArthur outside the Imperial Palace was a turning point in postwar history, the Emperor afterward cooperating with the occupation forces in transforming Japanese society and moving the people toward democracy.

Note: This film has not done well at the box office—I was the only audience member at a matinee showing—so see this film right away before it leaves your area.

For Reflection Discussion 1. How does the film show that just winning a war is not enough: that the peace that follows is just as important as the prosecution of the war? Compare the way the US treated Japan and Germany with the way the Allies (against Pres. Wilson's protests) treated Germany in the Treaty of Versailles, ending the First World War.

2. In what state is Japan in at the beginning of the film (both physically and mentally or spiritually)? How do we see that it is important to know the culture of the conquered people? For example, when MacArthur and his aides are traveling from the airport to Tokyo, what do the Japanese

guards stationed along the way do? How does everyone but Gen. Fellers understand this act at first?

3. How does the film portray Gen. MacArthur? By showing his ambitions and large ego the film is not a hero-worshipping work, is it? How does it become apparent that he is the right person to become the Supreme Commander in Japan?

4. Compare Gen. Fellers to his boss. How does it become apparent that he is the right person for his important assignment? What was the general disposition toward the Japanese back in America at the time, including President Truman? How could this have become very dangerous? How is General Richter the embodiment of this attitude?

5. What do you think of the dilemma in deciding what to do with Emperor Hirohito—arrest, put him on trial, and execute him if found guilty; or leave him alone on the throne while trying the rest of his inner circle? Why is it important to discover the truth about the Emperor's role in the government's decision to attack Pearl Harbor?

6. What does Feller's driver Takahashi contribute to the story? As a representative of the suffering people, what does his attitude reveal about the nature (or resiliency) of the Japanese people? If you were in his place, how might you have felt toward Americans?

7. How do Aya and her uncle add to the story (even if fictional)? How does the General help the young Fellers understand Japanese psychology? Surprisingly I do not recall the term "Bushido" being used, but this being the essence of what the General reveals to his guest, what is the essence of the Japanese warrior code?

8. In a passionate conversation between the investigator and a Japanese diplomat the latter points out that Americans also were guilty of atrocities in their bombing of the population

centers of Japan. How is this both an attempt to escape from guilt and a charge that also contains an element of truth? As a historical note, be aware that when the fascists in the 1930s bombed towns during the Spanish Civil War, it was widely condemned; and when the Nazis bombed the undefended towns of Poland and the Netherlands at the outbreak of WW 2, Pres. Roosevelt denounced the acts. And yet less than four years later we were doing the same thing. How does the "fog of war" affect us so that we accept the "unacceptable" when engaged in it—such as the widespread denunciation of the musical group the Dixie Chicks when they questioned President Bush's decision to make war against Iraq?

9. Going back to Q. 1, were you aware of the rebellion led by the militarists against Emperor Hirohito and his intention to call upon his people to surrender? How might this have changed post war history had it succeeded?

10. Despite his flaws, how can Gen. MacArthur be seen as a peacemaker? Do you think a peacemaker has to have the morals of a saint or be a pacifist to be one?