

Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Aftermath of World War II

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Embracing Defeat is a richly researched, beautifully illustrated and elegantly written account of the period of the US-led occupation of Japan from 1945–52, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the US National Book Award, among others. Throughout the book John Dower's writing is elegant, informative and easy to follow. Since its publication, *Embracing Defeat* has revived interest in this relatively short period of post-war history, even if, as Laura Hein has noted, much of that interest is related to the concerns of policy makers in Washington looking for an example of 'the good occupation' in light of US overreach in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁽¹⁾ Packed with photographs, cartoons, and copious footnotes, the book makes satisfying reading for a general audience and a valuable source for students of Japanese, US and indeed 20th-century history.

Changes in the way historians view both US history and the history of Japan mean that it is now possible to place the period within broader studies of imperial history from both national perspectives. But, beyond the framework of the nation-state, and the more overtly critical diplomatic history of the Wisconsin school, the rise of global history and the influence of post-colonial studies – the turn to culture as a site of historical interaction and meaning – has also allowed a more nuanced and complicated picture to emerge of the way in which both sides of this embrace affected and were affected by each other. John Dower's combination of socio-economic, cultural, political and diplomatic history was an early attempt to bring out the ambiguities.

For a Western power, occupying Japan at the end of the Second World War was never going to be easy. Having weathered the storm of Western imperialism in the late 19th century and trounced the Russian Empire in 1905, the country took on the task of creating 'Asia for the Asians' in the 1930s. By the summer of 1942, after the rapid colonisation of most of Southeast Asia, the history of Japan's experience of modernity was being framed within the context of a 'world historical' mission that no longer needed the 'West' as a reference. Except, that is, as a bankrupt and racist universalism brought to its knees by a truly global conflict. For some Japanese intellectuals, the best way to construct a post-war international order and move beyond the 'deathbed culture of the West' lay in 'overcoming democracy in politics', 'capitalism in economics' and an 'overcoming of liberalism in thought'.⁽²⁾

What a bitter pill, then, that when US-led occupation forces landed just over three years later they planned

not only for the disarmament and demilitarization of Japan, abolishing the country's capacity to make war, but also the strengthening of 'democratic tendencies and processes' in governmental, economic and social institutions. From the outset, under General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Command for Allied Powers made clear the desire that the Japanese Government conform as closely as possible to 'principles of democratic self-government' and announced their intention to encourage and support 'liberal political tendencies'.⁽³⁾ Such a total restructuring of the nation's basic values, political, economic and social institutions, with the goal of eventually restoring a status of independence and equality in the international community, appeared to require an overhaul of the way the Japanese people thought, not just about the nature of domestic institutions and ways of life, but also a transformation of a world view developed by intellectuals since at least the 1860s.

Yet there was always more at stake in what John Dower describes as this final 'immodest exercise in the colonial conceit known as "the white man's burden"' (p. 23). As John Embree warned almost a year before the occupation began, what the US did in Japan 'and the memories we leave behind us, may well determine whether we win or lose the peace in the Pacific'.⁽⁴⁾ Two years into the occupation, winning that wider peace was becoming increasingly difficult. By 1948, all the states of the former Japanese empire were at war, either fighting insurgent political factions within their own countries, their former European colonial masters, or sometimes both. The Communists were winning in China and the Soviet Union was close to obtaining the nuclear bomb. General MacArthur and SCAP began repealing many of the freedoms bestowed in the early years of occupation. This shift, from a perceived liberal democratic idealism in the early years, to a more realist and practical approach to the achievement of US hegemony in the region, lies at the core of John Dower's book.

On one level, the book is an outstanding account of US-Japan relations in the aftermath of the war and a useful guide to understanding the trans-national nature of Japan's rise to economic superpower. Just a few years into the occupation, the fear of communism and social unrest, driven by high unemployment, lack of basic necessities and the difficulty of reviving the economy, helped to establish a domestic conservative hegemony of politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen that remained dominant to the end of the century. Purging communist influence, or those perceived to have too much sympathy with the left, and eventually rearming the former enemy as a subordinate Cold War partner, the so-called 'Reverse Course', shifted the focus to making Japan 'the factory of Asia'. That task would involve re-structuring the economy and creating a paramilitary police force that would go on to form the core of the present day Self-Defence Forces. Even if this was a betrayal of the early aims of the occupation, by the 1980s Japan appeared to have won the Cold War because, as Dower notes, 'consigned to military and therefore diplomatic subservience to Washington's dictates, the only real avenue of postwar nationalism ... was economic' (p. 564).

First-hand accounts from those involved in the occupation helped to craft a history of the period as a successful attempt to transform a defeated enemy into a peaceful, democratic post-war ally. The idea that policy makers today still find so appealing. Yet, for all the pompous imperiousness of MacArthur and the idealistic condescension of the younger generation within SCAP, as Dower points out, the ideals of peace and democracy took root in Japan 'not as a borrowed ideology or imposed vision, but as a lived experience and a seized opportunity. They found expression through a great and often discordant diversity of voices' (p. 23). *Embracing Defeat* captures the complex nuances of the lived experiences of a people in the midst of a fundamental social and political transformation. The new social spaces opened up by defeat and occupation meant that people behaved in different ways, 'thought differently, encountered circumstances that differed from any they had previously experienced' or would again' (p. 121).

Combining cartoons, newspaper and journal articles, reader's letters, first-hand accounts of life under occupation, official documents from SCAP and from the Japanese government, Dower brilliantly captures that diversity. It is in the fourth section of the book that Dower's presentation and analysis of the 'democratic' reforms carried out by the occupation remains a benchmark for students of the period. He shows how the post-war constitution was not simply a top down imposition of the ideals of United States constitutionalism onto Japan, but rather a process that allowed for suggestions and proposals from various

groups of Japanese. Far from a top-down imposition, SCAP's drafting of a constitution in just five days came after the Japanese team led by Matsumoto Joji produced a draft that, according to the Mainichi newspaper, was a deep disappointment and one which 'simply seeks to preserve the status quo' (p. 359). It did not satisfy MacArthur.

The book's first chapter provides perhaps one of the best accounts in English of the devastation and destruction that formed the backdrop to the Emperor's speech of 15 August 1945. The recollections of 28-year-old farmer's wife Aihara Yu, her repeated incantation of the line from the Imperial Rescript: 'should any emergency arise offer yourselves courageously to the State', the crackling, high-pitched, stilted Imperial voice on the radio, completely incomprehensible to most listeners, stirred hope that her husband, drafted into the army in Manchuria, would at last return home. He died just before the surrender (p. 33-4). But the enormity of the task of returning 5.1 million Japanese living overseas, the fear of famine and the threat of starvation hanging over the defeated nation are made vivid by Dower's skilful use of the sources to expose the 'cultures of defeat' that thrived amidst the ruins. Indeed, later in the book we learn that 'over-playing starvation' was among the many items to be deleted and suppressed under SCAP's censorship operation (p. 411).

There is no doubt that Cold War concerns helped to build and maintain the hegemony of the Liberal Democratic Party in post-war Japan, or that there was a very real shift away from the promotion of democracy and liberal thought just a couple of years into the occupation. Dower's book dwells long on the cultures of defeat and the people's embrace of democracy during the early part of the occupation. He vividly portrays the excitement with which new ideas were welcomed, discussed and taken on board by the general populace, at least those living in the large cities. Yet here the structure of the book may be a problem. His account of the cultures of defeat and the Japanese people's embrace of the expressed aims of the occupation, such as democracy, equality and liberal thought, takes in the first two years. From part three on, we begin to see an increasingly dominant occupation force working with and through many of the Japanese right-wing elites purged at the very start.

The idea that, from then on, the democratic ideals of the people became overwhelmed by the interests of these elites often appears to point to a lack of individual agency on the part of the mass of the Japanese population. Something that was more of a militaristic, nationalist dream, not to mention an invention of the critics of mass culture that held sway in the late 1950s, than a concerted effort by US and Japanese power-brokers. Often those involved in the occupation mourned the passing of many of the reforms. As early as 1955, a former officer in the Civil Information and Education section of SCAP, James B. Gibson, could bemoan the fact that 'most of the occupation changes are being reversed one by one'.⁽⁵⁾ The censorship policies of the occupation were easily co-opted by the growth, in the 1950s, of a mass media often dominated by those who had served in the propaganda arm of the wartime Japanese state. Even during the occupation, movements of middle-class housewives, preaching to those less fortunate, could easily take on the haughty tones of the well-meaning white women who arrived to 'liberate' Japanese women by teaching them the best ways to do housework and cook nutritious food for the family.

Dower perhaps over-stress the newness of the ideas 'gifted' to Japan by the US. Concepts such as democracy, liberalism and equality had their own history in the country dating back to the Meiji Era. Post-war intellectuals, whilst taking their inspiration from the personal and intellectual influence of the West, quickly realised the need to situate those ideas within the everyday lives of the Japanese people.⁽⁶⁾ As soon as the occupation ended, debate and discussion began in earnest over the legacy of this 'colonial exercise'. The need to reform the US-written constitution, the cultural degradation, the selfishness wrought by the focus on individualism over the family system and filial piety, the loss of a spirit of self-reliance. Yet these were not simply the complaints of a wounded elite exposed to, or frightened by, the whims of a proletariat drunk on freedom of expression and liberal cultural mores. The debates filled the newspapers and popular journals for much of the early 1950s.

The more overtly political and ideological shift to the right in Japan would have to wait until the huge

outpouring of protest in 1960 against renewal of the US-Japan security Treaty that ultimately brought down the government of indicted war criminal and US stooge Kishi Nobusuke. Yet even in the aftermath of the ANPO protests, the stifling of democracy and individual subjectivity still required a subtle combination of economics and culture through the promotion of consumerism in the popular media, ultimately achieved only after the media spectacle of violent student protest in the mid-to-late 1960s. The democratic, liberal ideas of the early occupation period could, through rising living standards and the growth of a mass media, be welded to the desire to go shopping.

We have to wonder whether most Japanese people really did so readily welcome democracy in 1945. It becomes difficult to explain the lurch to the right at the end of the occupation and the domination of a single political party for the best part of 40 years unless we build a broader picture of the ambivalence of the Japanese towards these ideas at the end of the war. When the occupation ended in 1952, women's rights were rapidly overwhelmed by a return to a patriarchal view of marriage and gender relationships. This happened even as a record number of women held positions in parliament. By campaigning for a wage that could support a family throughout the 1950s, the unions ultimately forced women out of the workplace and back into the home as housewives and mothers. Seeing the occupation as a colonial project, as John Dower does, one in which the Japanese people warmly embraced democracy only to have it ripped away by US imperialists and the Japanese establishment, takes away agency from the people and leaves them, as in wartime, at the mercy of conspiring elites. With the rise of post-colonial studies, it also helps to shore up the victim mentality that drives much of the recent rise in nationalist rhetoric.

Embracing Defeat is an important book for all students of post-war Japanese history. In it John Dower brings together various strands of occupation history to offer an overview of the period that foregrounds the experience of the Japanese at the level of everyday life. If, towards the end, that everyday life seems overwhelmed by economic and political decisions taken out of the hands of the Japanese themselves, his book nevertheless remains the go to English language book on the period. The vibrancy, depth and importance of recent scholarship dealing with the issues raised by his work, along with the recent Japanese concern with the legacy of the period and the numerous unresolved international disputes, means that *Embracing Defeat* will remain essential reading.

Notes

Notes

1. L. Hein, 'Revisiting America's occupation of Japan', *Cold War History*, 11, 4 (2011), p. 579.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. H. Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), p. 38.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J.C.S 1380/15, BASIC DIRECTIVE FOR POST-SURRENDER MILITARY GOVERNMENT IN JAPAN PROPER, 3 November 1945.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. John F. Embree, 'Military occupation of Japan', *Far Eastern Survey*, 13, 19 (20 September 1944), 176.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. James B. Gibson, 'The occupation of Japan ten years later', *World Affairs*, 118, 4 (Winter 1955), 111.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Adam Bronson's recent book gives a useful outline of the dilemma these intellectuals faced at the end of the war. Adam Bronson, *One Hundred Million Philosophers: Science of Thought and the Culture of Democracy in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu, HI, 2016).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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