

# JAPAN'S IMPACT ON WORLD HISTORY

By Peter K. Frost

Many of us might find it hard to imagine Japan having a big impact on twentieth century world history. How could a nation smaller than the state of California, and dwarfed by its much larger neighbor China, possibly be a big player? Hopefully, the fact that Japan has the world's eleventh-largest population and is now the world's third-biggest economy may explain why Japan has had at least two different kinds of impacts on world history, each of which was a major influence in its own particular time period.

**IN WAR** The first of these impacts started with Japan's startling victory over China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895. Japan's success in the war with China was a product of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 when the Meiji Emperor and his allies defeated the Tokugawa Shōgun's forces, moved the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo and started to modernize the nation. The government quickly undertook reforms that abolished various "feudal" restrictions and sought not only Western political, economic and educational advice but also Western help in building a modern army and navy. This quickly led to a surprisingly easy victory over the corrupt and decaying Qing Dynasty (1640–1912).

For China, the war was not only a major military humiliation and the loss of its Taiwan territory, but also, because it had to pay reparations, an enormous economic burden. This initially led to the Boxer Rebellion, a nativist reaction by the peasant based "Righteous and Harmonious Fists" group that was encouraged by the highly conservative Empress Dowager CiXi. Soon poorly armed peasants were attacking foreign missionaries and even Chinese Christians. After Westerners who were living in Beijing had to be rescued by an eight nation international military force including Japanese military units, China was forced to pay even more money in reparations. CiXi began the process in October 1911 that would end the Qing Dynasty in early 1912. There was thus a direct link between Japan's victory and the collapse of what was once thought to be the major Asian power.

Other effects of Japan's victory were also great. Taiwan became one of the first of Japan's colonies, an event that helped create the current particularly acute tensions between that island and the mainland.

For the Europeans, China's defeat presented a good opportunity to gain more privileges at China's expense. In response, John Hay, the Secretary of State in President McKinley's administration, was so concerned about China's possible dismemberment that he wrote a series of notes in 1899–1900 that asked the

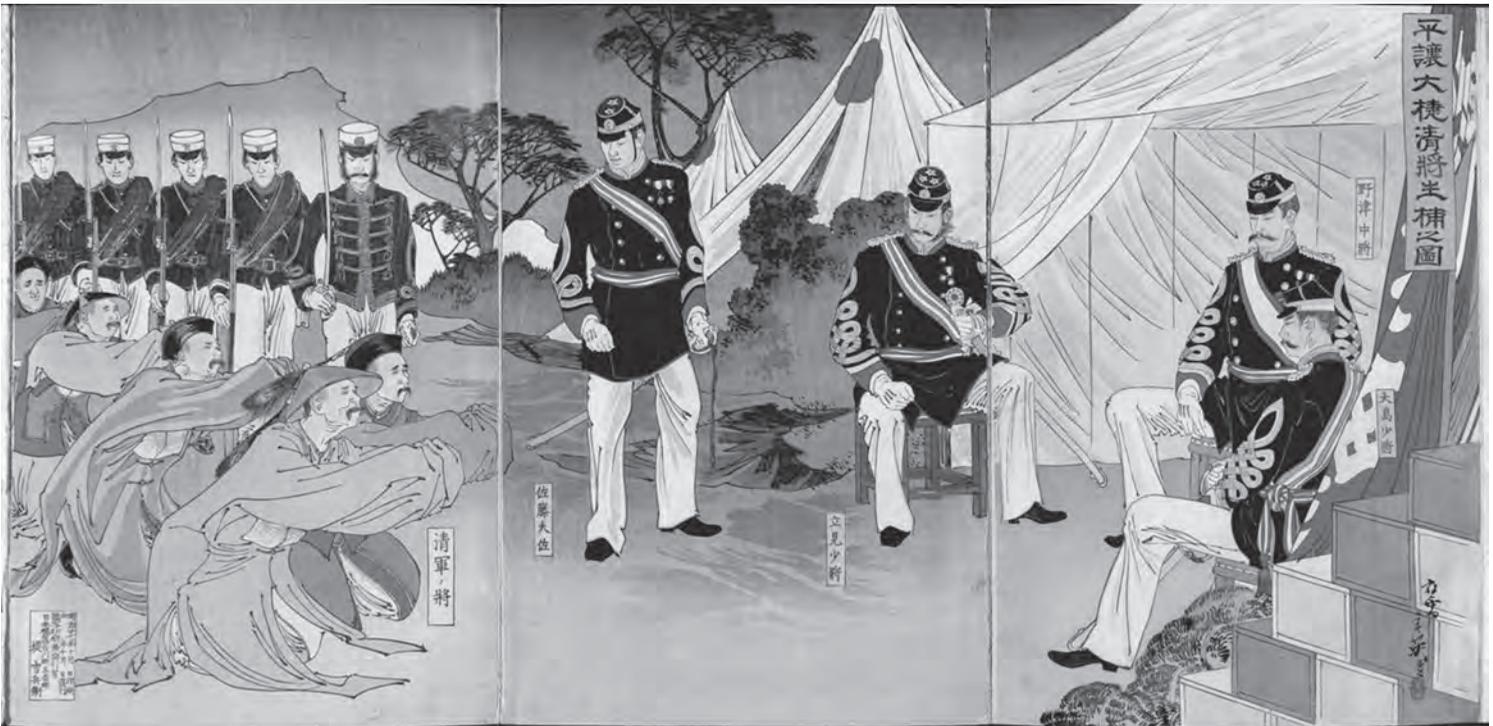


other Western powers not to overthrow the Qing but instead maintain an "Open Door" policy that would allow each Western power to trade in each other's separate zones of occupation. That policy sounded altruistic, but many saw Hay's efforts as simply an effort to make it possible for the United States to benefit from the colonial scramble.

Yet Japan was also unhappy. Its unexpected military triumph so worried the West that Russia, France and Germany, in what is commonly known as the Triple Intervention, demanded that the Japanese not be allowed to take over China's strategically important Port Arthur on the Liaodong Peninsula. After reluctantly agreeing to drop its claim to that port in return for an even greater cash settlement from China, the Meiji Emperor announced that "We must bear the unbearable." His grandson would repeat those same words in 1945.

Japan's defeat of Czarist Russia in 1905 had a similar worldwide effect. After tensions rose between the two countries over

Emperor Meiji and his entourage, moving from Kyoto to Tokyo in late 1868. Drawing by Alfred Roussin, a French navy officer who was in Japan at the time. Published in the French news magazine, *Le Monde illustré* (*The Illustrated World*). Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/yhu4539m>.



Chinese Generals from *Pyongyang Captured Alive* by Migita Toshihide, October 1894. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.  
Source: MIT Visualizing Cultures website at <https://tinyurl.com/3e3ub23r>.

exactly who would control Northern China, Manchuria and Korea, the war began when the Japanese Navy made an unannounced attack on Russian ships anchored off the China coast. Despite a stunning defeat of the reinforced Czar's navy by the Japanese, the heavy military casualties in the various mainland battles led the Japanese to ask President Theodore Roosevelt to help start peace negotiations in Portsmouth New Hampshire. The resulting 1905 Portsmouth Treaty forced Japan to give up its lease to Port Arthur, but did allow it to colonize the southern half of Sakhalin Island.<sup>1</sup>

This first defeat of a White power by a non-White power sent shockwaves throughout the world. In Russia itself, strikes and protests led constitutional reforms in what is normally called the First Russian Revolution. Soon, its social problems and its terribly high casualties in World War I would lead to the overthrow of the Czars in 1917, the intervention of an international force that included military help from Japan and eventually the formal establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922. Some Asian revolutionaries were delighted, but the Koreans were not, especially because Japan was now able to annex Korea in 1910. Even here, many Japanese people were once again unhappy. Unaware of the heavy Japanese casualties on the battlefields and the country's



*If the West could have colonies, why couldn't Japan?*

—Prince Konoe Fumimaro, 1918

Prince Fumimaro Konoe, in his twenties.  
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/2p8rtceh>.

financial difficulties, they thought that Russia should have been forced to pay indemnities and lose all, as opposed to only half, of the Sakhalin Island. Here as in other events, the rise of Japanese militarism was helped by the Japanese public's feeling that weak and corrupt civilian governments were incapable of protecting all of what the military had bravely and legitimately won.

In both wars Japan was challenging the Western notion that they were the only ones who could have colonies in Asia. As early as 1918, Prince Konoe Fumimaro, then just twenty-nine years old, had published a popular essay celebrating the victories over China and Russia and the subsequent absorption of Korea in 1910. If the West could have colonies, he said, why couldn't Japan? Then in 1933, Konoe wrote another essay explaining why in 1931, the Japanese military had created an "incident" that led to their takeover of Manchuria, the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo and Japan's decision to withdraw from the League of Nations. Konoe explained that "Japan's national survival compels us to act this way. . . . A distribution of land can hardly be called reasonable when it confines some nations with growing populations and a capacity for expansion within narrow territory, while other sparsely populated nations enjoy vast territories and abundant resources."<sup>2</sup>



Japanese lithograph depicting the peace negotiations brokered by the United States in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, August 1905.  
Source: MIT Visualizing Cultures website at <https://tinyurl.com/b4av94er>.



Emperor Matsuoka in Moscow signing the Soviet–Japanese Neutrality Pact in April 1941 with Joseph Stalin and Vyacheslav Molotov in the background. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/5xvd737v>.

**Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yonosuke signing the 1941 Soviet–Japanese Neutrality Pact.**

## Konoe and Matsuoka saw the two treaties not as ideological alliances, but rather as strategic treaties that would keep the West at bay while Japan absorbed colonies in Asia.

To this the soldier and right-wing politician Hashimoto Kingorō added in a 1939 essay that Japan was “like a great crowd of people packed into a small room.” Emigration and trade were two possible “doors” of escape but both had been closed by the legislation and tariffs of other nations, leaving territorial colonial expansion as the only reasonable “door” to provide a possible solution. Echoing Konoe’s logic, Hashimoto argued that if the West could justify their colonies by citing “God’s Will” to improve the lives of “untamed savages” then why wouldn’t it be right for Japan to look for “some place overseas where Japanese capital, Japanese skills and Japanese labor can have free play; free from the oppression of the white race?”<sup>3</sup>

Konoe then put his ideas into practice. During his first term as Prime Minister (June 4, 1934 to January 5, 1939), he failed in 1937 to stop the military from starting what eventually turned out to be another war with China that lasted until 1945. During his second term (July 22, 1940 to October 18, 1941) he allowed his Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yonosuke to sign first a Tripartite Pact alliance with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in September 1940 and then a neutrality treaty with the Soviet Union on April 13, 1941.

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**Signing of the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Italy and Japan**



Signing ceremony for the Axis Powers Tripartite Pact. Seated at front left (left to right) are Japan’s Ambassador Saburō Kurusu (leaning forward), Italy’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Galeazzo Ciano and Germany’s Führer Adolf Hitler (slumping in his chair). Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/yc8bsd5r>.

man responsible for the Alliance with Hitler,” Matsuoka told a group of Jewish businessmen, “but nowhere have I promised that I would carry out his anti-semitic policies in Japan.” While there was more than enough anti-Semitism in Japan, Japan did in fact shelter more Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany in its controlled zone in Shanghai city in China than did Australia, British India, New Zealand and South Africa combined.<sup>4</sup>

The hoped for deterrent effect of the treaties, on the other hand, did not work. When the Japanese military occupied the northern part of the French colony of present day Việt Nam, the so-called ABCD powers (America, the British Commonwealth, China and the Dutch), not deterred by Japan’s new alliances, embargoed sales of iron and steel. When the military then moved into south Việt Nam in August, 1941, the ABCD powers cut off Japan’s oil imports creating both an economic as well as political crisis. Konoe resigned after his initial attempts to negotiate with the Americans failed. He was replaced by General



The Greater East Asia Conference in November 1943, participants (front row, left to right): Ba Maw, Head of State of the State of Burma; Zhang Jinghui, Prime Minister of the Empire of Manchuria; Wang Jingwei, President of the Republic of China (Nanjing); Tōjō Hideki, Prime Minister of the Empire of Japan; Prince Wan Waithayakon, envoy from the Kingdom of Thailand, José P. Laurel, President of the Republic of the Philippines and Subhas Chandra Bose Head of State of the Provisional Government of Free India.  
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/2p8bbys2>.



Japanese Ambassador Admiral Nomura Kichisaburō (left) and Special Envoy Saburō Kurosu (right) meet with Secretary of State, Cordell Hull on November 17, 1941, two weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor.  
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/4u384fk7>.



The USS *West Virginia*, Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941.  
Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/bdhaknrm>.

Tōjō Hideki, a dedicated but not particularly fiery professional military man. His representatives then attempted to negotiate with Cordell Hull, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary of State, but the Japanese could not agree to the US demands that the embargoes would not stop until Japan also abandoned its occupation of China. As a result, on December 7, 1941, the Japanese made another undeclared attack, this time on Pearl Harbor, that caught the Americans by surprise. Thus in an uncanny parallel with the later Việt Nam War, Japan's attempt to control South Việt Nam led to the start of what the Japanese often call the Greater East Asian or Fifteen Years War.

That bloody and unfortunately quite racist war obviously had multiple effects. One is that France joined China and Russia as yet another would be power who had been humbled by the Japanese. Another is that Britain's initial shocking losses of Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, and a near defeat in Burma (now Myanmar) led to the postwar end of most of its colonies, particularly in Myanmar and India. Hong Kong stayed in British control until 1997, after which it continued to function as an important economic port and lively defender until recently of Western notions of human rights. Similarly, the Dutch soon lost their Indonesian colony to independence minded rebels initially backed by the Japanese. Perhaps the war even helped the United States honor its long-standing promise to give up its Philippines colony.

Another of the war's effects was a terrible famine, made worse by the war's dislocations, that occurred in Bengal. This helped Communist leaders such as Mao Zedong in China, Kim Il-sung in North Korea and Ho Chi Minh in Việt Nam gain revered stature as fighters not only against the Japanese, but also against the poverty and even starvation made worse by the famine. Each of these leaders, not to mention others, now had nationalist as well as Communist credentials. We should also note that even in Japan and Britain, let alone the rest of Asia, the demands of the war created pressures for greater social justice. All this benefited progressive revolutionaries.

## IN PEACE

While Japan might well have been expected to stop affecting world history after its devastating defeat, it actually made several important contributions to the post World War Two era.

First, the Japanese made serious attempts to change their image from that of a ruthless aggressor to a peace loving nation. This began when, unlike Germany and Italy, Emperor Hirohito and his advisors decided to surrender before their country was invaded. They did this not only because they knew that the war was lost and wanted to stop any further damage from the United States after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and Nagasaki on August 9, 1945, but also because the Soviet Union declared war on Japan.

On August 7, 1945 Russia soon began seizing much of Japan's recently acquired territory. The Emperor and his advisors were afraid that if the Soviet Union were given a separate zone of occupation, as it was in Germany, it would surely insist on abolishing the Emperor system and perhaps even be able to encourage a Communist led revolt.

The Emperor's August 15, 1945, radio broadcast announcing the nation's surrender cleverly avoided any mention of these fears. After noting in his first ever radio broadcast to his people that the war had gone "not necessarily to Japan's advantage," the Emperor focused instead on President Truman's decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "[T]he enemy," he said, "had begun to use a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is incalculable. . ." Were the nation to continue the fight, "not only would it result in the ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization." Put another way, Japan claimed that it was surrendering not because it had been defeated or that it was by August 1945 fighting the Soviets, but rather because of its desire to spare Japan and the world from an atomic disaster. How else, the Emperor concluded, "are we to save the millions of our subjects or atone Ourselves before the hallowed spirits of Our Imperial Ancestors?"<sup>25</sup>

The Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952) that followed was almost exclusively an American undertaking. In what may well have reflected an unspoken bargain—not to mention an impossibly difficult military situation to change—The Allies allowed the USSR to retain much of Eastern Europe and have their own zone in Germany, but the US insisted on being in charge of the occupation of Japan. The British, despite their war efforts in Asia had only small zones of occupation. The Soviet Union had none. The Americans, not the Soviets or other wartime Allies, picked General Douglas MacArthur to be the first Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP). While some American women such as Eleanor Hadley, Beate Sirota and Ethel Weed made important contributions, American military male officers were the heads of all of the occupation's major bureaucratic offices. A few judges from other countries were allowed to participate in the major war crimes trials and other Allied representatives were on two advisory committees, but simply put, the Americans ran the show.

Because this was what the Japanese government hoped for, it further improved the nation's new image as a peace loving nation by mostly cooperating with its American masters. Even after the occupation ended, it kept the largely American written Article 9 of the new 1947 Constitution which outlawed "war as an instrument of national policy" and promised that "land, sea and air



August 9, 1945 New York Times front page. Source: *The New York Times* archives at <https://tinyurl.com/bde73uf8>.

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August 15, 1945, Japanese people lower their heads toward the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, as Emperor Hirohito announced on radio that Japan was defeated in World War II. Source: *The Day* website at <https://tinyurl.com/2p8mzkch>.

forces as well as other war potential, will never be maintained." While bowing to intense American pressure on the Japanese to rearm and allow American military bases to stay in the country, its military is still called a Self Defense Force. It is not allowed to develop or use nuclear weapons, and its budget is limited to one percent of the nation's Gross National Product (GDP). Furthermore, after the occupation ended, the Japanese opened large atom bomb memorials in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Annual services in memory of the fallen are still held annually.

Japan in this period also emerged as a model for economic development. Between 1950 and 1973, the country's Gross National Product (GNP) tripled. The media liked to call this Japan's "economic miracle," but it is surely better to use Chalmers Johnson's notion of a "Plan Rational" economy. "The 'plan' part of this economy stemmed from the fact that Japan during the war years had developed powerful bureaucratic controls to mobilize the economy. The American occupation authorities



Japanese Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu signs the Instrument of Surrender on behalf of the Japanese Government, on board USS Missouri on September 2nd, 1945. Lieutenant General Richard K. Sutherland, US Army, watches from the opposite side of the table. Foreign Ministry representative Toshikazu Kase is assisting Mr. Shigemitsu. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/56bj36zb>.



Emperor Hirohito and General MacArthur, at their first meeting, at the US Embassy, Tokyo, September 27, 1945. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/yckrhzwu>.

kept much of this system as they needed a strong bureaucracy to implement their plans. They also did not see the need to break up Japan's traditionally powerful banks or, after changing its mind, feel that they needed to impose anything more than mild reforms on Japan's traditional business conglomerates. The government's powerful bureaucracy thus could signal to Japan's huge banks which business firms should be funded by bank loans and who should get any licenses that might be needed. Unlike the more volatile stock offerings which put a premium on short term profits, the bank loans encouraged a long term growth strategy of building market share.<sup>7</sup>

The "rational" or "capitalist" part of this system sprang from the fact that the various firms could use these loans to compete with other, similar firms in what SCAP official Eleanor Hadley called a "cordial oligopoly."<sup>8</sup> Helped by close ties with subsidiary firms, enthusiastic labor moving from the rural areas to the cities, readily available technology often improved by the Japanese, a favorable exchange rate and a bountiful supply of a youthful and educated labor force, the economy boomed. Soon high quality Japanese TVs, electronic and particularly cars were competing in the United States and elsewhere. As Japan's economy grew, pundits began to praise the Japanese "miracle." Although growth slowed dramatically about the same time as the Emperor died (1989), this was in part because nations like China and Viet Nam adopted arts of the "Plan Rational" model.

Arguably the most important world history legacy that Japan left in this period was the impact on the United States.



Tōjō Hideki, former Japanese General Premier and War Minister, from December 1941 to July 1944, takes the stand for the first time during the International Tribunal trials, Tokyo, Japan. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/2p8tf4th>.

### **The core principle that political leaders can be tried for waging an aggressive war and/or not stopping war crimes has become an integral part of both the United States and the world's current legal framework.**

This American sense of the moral righteousness of their cause is best illustrated by the American decision to support war crimes trials in both Tokyo and Germany. The idea that political leaders could be punished for a “conspiracy” to start an aggressive war (a legal term not found in European or Japanese law) as opposed to a war of self-defense was naturally controversial. So was the decision that even though Japan actually protected rather than slaughtered Jews like the Nazis, Japan's leaders could be tried for the military mistreatment of POWs, the slaughter of Chinese civilians in the 1937 Nanjing Massacre and the inexcusable treatment of “comfort women” many of whom were Korean, who were forced to be sex workers. Furthermore, if idealists really wanted to talk about aggressive war and human rights abuses, critics said, why wasn't the Soviet Union tried for breaking its neutrality treaty with Japan? Shouldn't the United States be told to defend its decision to drop two atomic bombs? Wasn't Tōjō Hideki right when he called the trial “Victor's Justice”? All these issues have been actively debated, and yet despite all this, the core principle that political leaders can be tried for waging an aggressive war and/or not stopping war crimes has become an integral part of both the United States and the world's current legal framework.

President Truman's decision to dismiss General Douglas MacArthur from his job as the first SCAP commander also had an important impact. By 1951, MacArthur had publicly criti-

cized the Truman administration's refusal to widen the Korean War (1950–1954) by enlisting help from the recently defeated Chinese Nationalist forces. President Truman found this was a tough battle to fight, not least because MacArthur had emerged from World War II and the early part of the Korean War as a brilliant tactician and charismatic leader. American conservatives, most of whom opposed President Truman's other policies as well, were so convinced that the President's decision was wrong that by the year MacArthur died (1964), they had built the MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk Virginia to honor his credo of “duty, honor, country.” Yet in the end, most Americans and Japanese supported Truman's decision both because it reinforced the American concept that military authorities must be subordinate to their civilian Commander-in-Chief and because President Truman's decision was a valuable lesson for the Japanese and perhaps even the rest of the world.

Most of all, the American sense that it had successfully reformed Japan had a profound impact on the nation's foreign policy decisions. Some distinguished academics have criticized the decision to keep the emperor on the throne and have shown how both SCAP and conservative Japanese politicians have reversed some of the more contentious occupation reforms. Medical, agricultural and educational reforms (apart from an important battle over textbook distortion of World War II), remain in place, and Japan is now a reliable partner of the United States. The heavily American influenced 1947 Constitution remains the oldest unamended written constitution in the world, and not one American soldier has been killed by a Japanese during the entire occupation and postwar period.

This sense that the Americans succeeded in Japan may well have influenced the United States decision to intervene in Việt Nam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Certainly when President George W. Bush tried in 2005 to rally support for his increasingly unpopular intervention in Iraq, he admitted that the struggle had been difficult, but cited the transformation of Germany and Japan as proof of “the unstoppable power of freedom.” If this Western notion of “freedom” worked in rebuilding two of the



Nagasaki Peace Park sculpture by Seibo Kitamura. On the Peace Statue plaque is a poem titled "Words from the Sculptor." The following lines from the poem explains the symbolism: "The right hand points to the atomic bomb, the left hand points to peace, and the face prays deeply for the victims of war. Transcending the barriers of race and evoking the qualities of Buddha and God, it is a symbol of the greatest determination ever known in the history of Nagasaki and the highest hope of all mankind." Quote excerpt source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/bdfhfh7>. Image source: © Shutterstock stock photos.

United States' most bitter adversaries, then why wouldn't it work in Iraq as well?<sup>9</sup>

The answer is that Japan was different. Whereas Japan knew that it was about to lose its war, the leaders of Việt Nam, Afghanistan and Iraq neither feared being defeated nor worried about a Soviet occupation. Whereas Japan could build on its prior attempts to create a Western style parliamentary democracy, those other countries could not. Japan had far fewer religious conflicts and, crucially, far less crippling levels of corruption. It was also more literate and soon had per capita income levels that are more associated

with democracy. "The occupation of Japan," wrote George Packard, a distinguished scholar and former foundation head, "was successful primarily because the Japanese people wanted it to be. . . . It would be condescending to imagine that this highly literate and talented people will not find ways to control their destiny in the future."<sup>10</sup>

Put another way, yet another of Japan's particularly important contributions to world history is the lesson that Western definitions of "freedom" work best when they are planted on fertile ground. ♦

## NOTES

1. The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to President Theodore Roosevelt's for his efforts to end the Russo-Japanese War.
2. Oka Yoshitake, *Konoe Fumimaro: A Political Biography*, trans. Okamoto Shumpei and Patricia Murray (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1983), 27, 37.
3. Hashimoto's speech can most easily be found in the *Wikipedia* entry "Hashimoto Kingorō."
4. David G. Goodman and Miyazawa Masanori, *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 112-114. See also David B. Gordon, "A Tale of Two Diplomats: Ho Fengshan, Sugihara Chiune and Jewish Efforts to Flee Nazi Europe," *Education About Asia* 20, no. 2, (2015): 20-25.
5. The Emperor's broadcast can most easily be found by Googling "Emperor Hirohito's Surrender broadcast." His stress on how shocking the bomb was is actually how Secretary of War Henry Stimson later defended President Truman's decision to drop the two bombs.
6. Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925-1975* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982).
7. *Ibid.*
8. Eleanor Hadley with Patricia Hagen Kuwayama, *Memoir of a Trustbuster: A Lifelong Adventure with Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 74.
9. Google "George W. Bush's Wednesday, November 30, 2005, address to the Naval Academy." I use "Western" notions of "freedom to" speak and vote freely to contrast "freedom from" poverty and humiliation.
10. George R. Packard, "Another Look at the Occupation of Japan: Through the Minefields of Japanese History," *Education About Asia* 8, no. 2 (2003): 34-38.

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