

THROUGH THE MINEFIELDS OF JAPANESE HISTORY

By George R. Packard

Observing the difficulties encountered in the American occupation of Iraq in the summer of 2003, we are reminded of just how hard it is to impose democratic rule by military force on a nation unaccustomed to democracy. And, with the perspective of more than a half a century, we can marvel at the success of the American occupation of Japan.

History beguiles us with its apparent inevitability. We tend to forget alternative courses that could have been taken. In the case of the occupation of Japan, it is worth remembering today that it was by no means inevitable that Douglas MacArthur would emerge as benevolent Shogun, that the Emperor would persuade his people peacefully to lay down their arms, that able Japanese bureaucrats would manage the transition from abject defeat to economic miracle, that Shigeru Yoshida would provide strong leadership, that communists supported by the Soviet Union did not foment a revolution, and that the people would welcome democracy.

There was nothing inevitable about how the occupation unfolded, and in fact a close study of the making of U.S. policy toward Japan in 1945 indicates that there was serious disagreement about how to deal with a defeated Japan. Some in the Truman Administration argued for the execution or forced abdication of the Emperor, the complete breakup of the *zaibatsu* (powerful financial combines), and permanent purge of the prewar governing aristocratic, bureaucratic, and business elites. That disagreement arose in part out of an even older argument among scholars and historians of Japan about the nature of Japanese society and governance since 1600. It continues among scholars to this day. Quite simply, were the Japanese people prepared to embrace democracy and make it work?

There is still no consensus within Japan or among foreign scholars about how to interpret key events of the past 150 years and whether democracy is working today. Japanese educators, historians, and intellectuals, who care deeply about the history of their nation, disagree passionately. American policy-makers in 1945 did not have the luxury of time to debate these issues. They had to accept one or another of the prevailing interpretations. Two of the most highly respected foreign historians of the time were

Edwin O. Reischauer and E. Herbert Norman. They held diametrically opposed interpretations of Japanese history.

The lives of Norman and Reischauer form a fascinating counterpoint. Both men were born in Japan to Protestant missionaries, Norman in 1909 to Canadian parents in rural Nagano and Reischauer a year later to American parents in urban Tokyo. Both spent their boyhoods in Japan, and both got Ph.D.s at Harvard in the 1930s under the direction of Serge Elisséeff. Both eventually rose to important Japan policy-making positions in their respective governments. Reischauer became the progenitor of Japanese studies in America as a Harvard professor in the 1950s and later served as President Kennedy's Ambassador to Japan. Norman became a respected scholar and diplomat in the Canadian foreign service, rising eventually to the rank of Ambassador to Egypt. In the early occupation days, he was seconded to serve on General MacArthur's staff in Tokyo because of his deep knowledge of Japan and the Japanese language.

Despite their overlapping backgrounds, their views on the Tokugawa, Meiji, and Taisho Periods were dramatically different. This would be a minor footnote if it were not that their contrasting views continue to influence scholars and policy-makers to this day. Occupation planners had to choose one or the other interpretation. Here are their major differences.

The Tokugawa (or Edo) Period, 1600–1868

The view taken by Edwin O. Reischauer, and many of his colleagues and students, was that the late Tokugawa era, or Japan's late feudalism, also saw the beginnings of modernization—a period of slow but positive change, in which the economic, social, and intellectual foundations for modern Japan were laid, under conditions of tranquility and order. Japan was ready in 1868, he argued, to shed its feudal past because of a rise in economic productivity, the spread of technology, the growth of cities, marked advances in education and literacy, the development of a rudimentary financial system, the growth of a merchant class, and the spread of trade in a national market. New prosperity in rural areas and the rise of peasant entrepreneurs would form the backbone of a future middle class. Vil-

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lages learned to govern themselves with some degree of autonomy. The arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853 and the threat posed by Western imperialism merely accelerated internal changes that were well underway in the mid-nineteenth century.

For Norman, the Tokugawa Era had no redeeming features: it was in his view a crushing and oppressive nightmare for the Japanese people. "In any feudal society," he wrote in 1944, "we find a narrow privileged ruling class deriving its power from the control over the land and the people who work for it; an oppressed peasantry living on the threshold of starvation; agricultural productivity at so low a level that famine is endemic; decentralization of power and consequent obstruction of trade; political life marked by plots, intrigues and coups d'etat rather than by organized movements; and finally the destiny of individuals governed by the concepts of social status. All of this is exemplified by Japanese feudalism, particularly of the Tokugawa era . . ." ¹ Regimentation, the use of secret police, rigid thought control, drabness of life, the stultification of intellectual ambition, and torture, left Japan at the end of the Tokugawa era "spiritually and intellectually exhausted to such an extent that that effect was felt long into the succeeding era." ²

The Meiji Restoration of 1868–1912

Was this a real revolution and a step toward modern democracy, or a consolidation of power by feudal samurai and wealthy merchants left over from the Tokugawa Period?

Flowing from his view of the Tokugawa Era, Reischauer saw the Meiji Restoration as a successful and promising stage in Japan's progress toward modernization and democracy. The "restoration" of Imperial rule—moving the Meiji Emperor from Kyoto to Tokyo and vesting him with constitutional powers that no Emperor had ever enjoyed before—was simply a clever use of history and tradition to justify revolutionary changes.

He argued that the abolition of feudal rule and institutions, the centralization of political power, the promulgation of a constitution, the rise of political parties, elections and a parliamentary system borrowed from England, the conversion of samurai into civil servants, the spread of universal compulsory education, and rapid industrialization laid the groundwork for a modern nation-state. "Japan stands alone," he wrote of the Meiji Restoration, "as the one great non-Western nation to have made the transition to a modernized society and economy with relatively little turmoil and extraordinary success." ³

The Meiji Era for Norman represented an incomplete revolution: it involved the seizure of power by lower level samurai and their rich merchant allies, but the government remained in the hands of the former feudal elite, the samurai class, who were quick to suppress any popular or mass movements that might

threaten their power. To the extent it was a revolution at all, it was a revolution from above. None of the Meiji reforms that Reischauer praised could change the fact that in Norman's view, "the continuity of class rule from feudal to modern times was not broken." ⁴ In his view, Japan needed a thorough social revolution. This view was close to that of Japanese Marxist scholars who became a dominant force among left-wing academic and intellectual circles in postwar Japan.

Taisho Democracy (1913–32)

Reischauer found hope in the rapid rise of parliamentary power, the leadership of party cabinets, and a broad range of liberalizing tendencies together with enthusiastic borrowing from the West. Foreign Minister Shidehara and like-minded Japanese diplomats accepted the League of Nations and appeared to accept the international order in Asia of that time. Enthusiasm for liberal Western concepts swept the nation; college students embraced freer social arrangements; women achieved a measure of freedom, mass culture of the West had a brief vogue; the literature of the whole world became available to Japanese readers in cheap translated editions. Under different international circumstances, Reischauer thought, these tendencies might well have become stronger and Japan might have taken its place along with England and the U.S. as a modern industrialized democracy. It was by no means inevitable that Japan's expansive militarists would lead the country into disastrous war.

For Norman, the Taisho changes were superficial; class structure was unchanged, and the samurai were still in charge. It was all but foreordained that they would prevail in crushing any liberal movements that might limit their power. And given international developments, including the world-wide depression, the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy, Japan's need to expand to feed its growing population, supply its industry, and find new markets, and the perceived threat of communism from the Soviet Union and nationalism in China, it was not surprising that Japan's military leaders embarked upon aggression in China that led directly to Pearl Harbor and crushed their liberal opponents. For Reischauer, the militarism of the 1930s was an aberration. For Norman, it flowed from Japan's history.

This, then, is the complex background to the American approach to the occupation. If two such eminent scholars, both men of good will and deep conviction, could disagree so radically, what hope was there for the planners in the State Department such as Hugh Borton, Joseph Grew, and Robert Fearey who began work on postwar Japan as early as 1942, *three years* before Japan's surrender?

They could not engage in academic debate; they had to ask hard questions about the Japanese and their history and choose among policy options:

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Were the people, once liberated from their military leaders, capable of managing democratic government?

Was the Emperor part of the problem or part of the solution?

Would the occupation be short and benign or long and punitive?

In general, they came close to accepting Reischauer's assumptions: liberated from the militarists and their ultra-right supporters, the Japanese people would embrace the democratic ideals that had taken root in the 1920s.

By the time of Japan's surrender on August 14, 1945, American policy had been spelled out as follows: "the authority of the Emperor and the Japanese Government to rule the state shall be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers."⁵ And "The ultimate form of government in Japan shall, in accordance with the Potsdam Declaration, be established by the freely expressed will of the Japanese people."⁶ This formulation gave cover to the Emperor and the peace faction in Japan to surrender and to avoid the massive bloodbath that a U.S. invasion of Japan would have caused.

Rejecting more punitive proposals, President Truman determined that the occupation would be benign and short, ending when the two goals of *democratization and demilitarization* were complete. It would be an entirely American affair, under the unchallenged command of General Douglas MacArthur. The Emperor would be retained in a new constitution as "symbol of the unity of the Japanese people." The American occupiers would work their will through the Japanese Government. Treatment of the Japanese military would not be vindictive, except in the cases of those leaders who were identified in the International Military Tribunal for the Far East as war criminals.

With the advantage of fifty years of hindsight, the occupation of Japan is clearly an outstanding American and Japanese success story. The most notable triumphs were:

Demilitarization. Japan over the past fifty years has arguably been the most peace-loving nation on earth. The people have rejected not only the militarists who plunged them into a disastrous war but also the entire culture of military rule by the samurai class. They have so far resisted every effort to change Article IX of their constitution that prohibits war.

Acceptance of the Constitution. Despite many minority efforts to scrap or amend it, the Constitution remains in force exactly as it was written in 1946 by MacArthur's staff. The document is a delicate compromise between American belief in the rights of individuals and Japanese traditional concepts of duty and loyalty. If anything, this Constitution is more liberal than our own.

Land Reform. Breaking up the large estates of absentee landlords and making land available to the entire rural population, a new class of prosperous farmers with a stake in the democratic system took the place of an oppressed peasantry. The bloody revolutions that shook Russia and China were avoided.

Operation of parliamentary democracy. The Japanese people have accepted equality under the rule of law, representa-

tive institutions including a National Diet and prefectural assemblies, an independent judiciary, cabinet government, free elections, political parties, protection of human rights, equal rights for women, free labor unions, and freedom of religion.

Other occupation reforms have brought mixed results:

Government Decentralization. Though MacArthur had little choice but to use the Japanese bureaucracy, and though the bureaucrats did contribute to Japan's "economic miracle" from 1952–1990, today their tight, centralized controls are in some areas inhibiting reforms desired by the Japanese people.

The break-up of the zaibatsu. (financial combines) was incomplete and the resulting *keiretsu* have in the past decade inhibited competition and economic reforms.

Education, though far more liberal than in pre-war Japan, remains tightly controlled by the Education Ministry and fails to produce the creative individuals who are needed in the twenty-first century.

The three most controversial aspects of the occupation are as follows:

The Emperor. Should MacArthur have tried Hirohito as a war criminal, and either executed him or forced him to abdicate? A provocative recent Pulitzer Prize-winning book by historian Herbert Bix argues that Hirohito, far from being a willing dupe of the militarists, was knowledgeable and active in promoting the war effort, and should have been held accountable.⁷ At the least, he should have been forced to abdicate. John Dower, author of *Embracing Defeat*, arguably the finest work on the occupation⁸ as it affected ordinary Japanese lives, agrees.

Here we can see the re-emergence of E. H. Norman's views. Dower and Bix, both admirers of Norman, were critical of MacArthur's policy of relying on Yoshida and the Japanese elites, including the Emperor. Norman and these later scholars thought that Japan should have a revolution from below and rid itself once and for all of feudal remnants lingering from the Tokugawa and Meiji Period. Bix and Dower in 1968 were members of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars who opposed the U.S. role in the war in Vietnam, and they endorsed Asian revolutions as the only way Asian nations could escape U.S. hegemony in the region. They have not, as far as I know, explained what the consequences might have been had Japan undergone a communist-led revolution in the period 1945–47.

Reischauer's interpretation, and the view that drove occupation policy, was that in the chaos and social turmoil, the poverty and despair, and the threat of a communist takeover (with Soviet aid) in post-surrender Japan, the Emperor provided a comforting symbol and a legitimizing force for MacArthur's reforms. Punishing the Emperor might have produced a dangerous nationalist reaction. Taisho democracy had given the people a taste of freedom, and they would embrace occupation reforms with enthusiasm. Reischauer's interpretation has proved correct. And today's Imperial Family members are a positive influence for democracy.

A second controversy revolves around the *war crimes trials*.

Richard Minear argues persuasively that the International Military Tribunal was tainted from the start: *ex post facto* law was applied to arbitrarily chosen defendants.⁹ The Emperor, in whose name they fought, was immunized. There was a presumption of guilt.

It is hard to defend the trials, except in terms of politics and Old Testament retribution. One wonders whether President Truman could have survived the uproar that would have resulted from allowing the top military leaders of Japan to fade into comfortable retirement.

In any case, the hanging of the “seven samurai” as they have come to be revered in nationalist circles in Japan, created martyrs who are believed by some to be reposing at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. A 1998 film, *Purido*, honoring one of the seven, General Tōjō Hideki, was a popular success. And visits to the shrine by Prime Minister Koizumi and others have angered Chinese and Koreans, complicating Japan’s efforts to put World War Two behind it.

A third controversy involved MacArthur’s *preservation of bureaucratic elites*.

Chalmers Johnson has written persuasively on the continuity between the pre-war and postwar bureaucrats in the Ministry of International Trade and Industry.¹⁰ There is no doubt that arrogant and powerful bureaucrats have hampered democratic development in some areas, particularly in their usurpation of legislative powers from elected politicians. Yet it is hard to see what alternative MacArthur might have had in 1945. There were scarcely 200 Americans who could speak even primitive Japanese at that time. Could they have transmitted reform policies to a nation of 70 million? It seems doubtful.

In any case, the occupation lasted six years and eight months: shorter by far than the twelve years it took for the last Union occupiers to leave the old Confederate states after our Civil War; longer than was originally planned because of the outbreak of war in Korea. Its guiding principles lay in the experience of Harry

Truman’s generation with a defeated Germany after World War One: a punitive occupation could only breed new disasters.

Is Japan today a functioning democracy? If the occupation was a success, why are we seeing so many books and articles these days by Japanese and Americans proclaiming that Japan’s democracy is dysfunctional (with its one-party rule and corrupt money politics) and that its economy is a stagnating disaster? I believe these writers are as wrong as the “revisionists” of the 1980s who warned that Japan was a threat to American security. We can see fresh evidence almost daily of the workings of democracy, halting and fitful though they may be, that are emerging to deal with the economic problems and the one-party system.

It is self-evident that no ideal democracy exists anywhere on earth. As we assess Japanese democracy, let’s ask, *compared to what?* Would it be the U.S. version, where a man can buy a Senate seat in New Jersey for \$65 million? Or become mayor of New York for \$70 million? Or become president with a minority of the popular vote? After the Enron scandal, can we say that “crony capitalism” is an Asian phenomenon? Can we argue, for example, that the growing gap between rich and poor in our country bodes well for democracy? I view Japanese democracy as a “work in progress,” much like our own. And I would contend that Japan’s far more equal distribution of wealth and the “social contract” that seeks to avoid massive layoffs and unemployment could in the long run be relative advantages for Japanese democracy.

It is true, in hindsight, that some characteristics found in Japanese traditional culture have made the transition to democratic government slower and more painful than occupation planners foresaw. For example, too much reverence for the elderly has inhibited younger and more flexible leaders from emerging. The Japanese have recently invented an amusing word for this: *rōgai* (damage caused by the elderly). Overly strict respect for traditional hierarchies and order in many fields blocks the emergence of new ideas. Too much concern for status has blocked healthy

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change. Docility toward government authorities and the lack of private or civic institutions has made central government too powerful for too long.

Then there are more recent problems. The stunning prosperity created by Japanese bureaucratic and business elites in the decades between 1960 and 1990 have kept the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in power, and have made voters reluctant to change. In a sense the voters are victims of success. No viable opposition party has arisen to challenge this power precisely because no crisis has been perceived by the Japanese public.

At the grassroots level, however, we can see robust democratic forces in action in many areas. Nagano Prefecture voters in September 2002 overwhelmingly re-elected Governor Tanaka Yasuo after he took on the LDP and opposed wasteful public works in his prefecture. Voters in a tiny town in Niigata Prefecture voted in a referendum to turn down government plans to locate a nuclear power plant in their area.

New kinds of television programs feature investigative reporting and more interpretation and criticism of the politicians. Interviews with political leaders are far tougher than ever before. Non-profit or non-governmental organizations are springing up everywhere to protect the environment, represent consumers, and the elderly. Women are voting silently against subservience in the household by delaying marriage or refraining from having children. Consumer advocates are taking on large corporations. Voters increasingly call themselves independent; no party can take them for granted. Elected politicians are beginning to write laws—a process that bureaucrats once controlled.

The occupation of Japan was successful primarily because the Japanese people wanted it to succeed. It rested on their high levels of education and literacy, homogeneity, sense of nationhood, capacity for hard work and cooperation, organizational skills and industrial know-how, deferential attitudes toward authority, weariness with war and militarism, past experience with parliamentary government, and with an established political class accepted as legitimate. It succeeded also because the U.S. had overwhelming military force, unity of command, trust in Japanese competence to make the new system work, and supreme confidence that liberal democracy was a universal ideal for all peoples at all times. There was also the factor that Soviet and Chinese communism spooked Japan's leaders and made them more cooperative with the United States.¹¹

Does the occupation offer any lessons about the use or misuse of history in crafting policy?

I would argue that a correct understanding of history is important. Reischauer had it right. Japan was ready for demilitarization and democratization. Norman and his followers would

have attempted artificially to impose a Marxist interpretation on Japanese history that called for class struggle and violent revolution. The tragedy of China's Cultural Revolution (1966–76) speaks to the folly of that course. The occupation, coming after a bloody war, was a peaceful revolution that took advantage of the history and experience of the Japanese people.

The test for any democracy is whether the people retain (and are willing to fight for) their right to live under a government of law, freely elect their own leaders, influence government policies, and control the destiny of their nation. No political leader in post-war Japan has dared to tamper with this arrangement precisely because he would fail in spectacular fashion. The roots of democracy in Japan are strong and deep, nourished by a half century of experimentation. It would be condescending to imagine that this highly literate and talented people will not find ways to control their destiny in the future. ■

NOTES

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2. *Ibid.*, 11.
3. Reischauer, Edwin O. *Japan: The Story of a Nation*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Alfred H. Knopf, Inc., 1970).
4. Norman, op. cit., 358.
5. Moore, Ray A. and Donald L. Robinson. *Partners for Democracy: Crafting the New Japanese State Under MacArthur* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 30.
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7. Bix, Herbert P. *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2000).
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11. Moore, Ray A. and Robinson, Donald L. *Partners for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2002) spell out some of these ideas in this superb new book.

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