

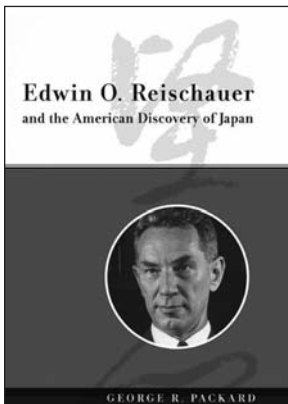
Edwin O. Reischauer and the American Discovery of Japan

BY GEORGE R. PACKARD

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Reviewed by Robert Fish



Is there a social studies teacher who has never been asked, “Why does studying history matter?” Edwin O. Reischauer’s career illustrates the direct impact history and “academic” ideas can have on contemporary life. George R. Packard’s *Edwin O. Reischauer and the American Discovery of Japan* guides the reader through the relationship between abstract ideas, historical scholarship, and real life. This study encapsulates key concepts central to the social studies classroom. Namely, what is the importance of an individual versus larger forces in influencing the course of history? How are moral judgments influenced by the historical

context in which they are made? Why should an American bother to learn about the rest of the world? Reischauer confronted these questions directly in both his scholarship and diplomatic career, and his decisions were sometimes the source of virulent debate during the course of his lifetime. Packard’s sympathetic, but for the most part balanced, portrayal of Reischauer’s life provides teachers concrete grist to help their students confront all of the above questions.

Reischauer was a towering figure in Japanese studies and US-Japan relations in the twentieth century. Four essential areas make his life of interest to non-specialists and helped make him controversial. First, he managed to both influence and be influenced by many of the major events in US-East Asian relations that occurred in the twentieth century. Second, Reischauer helped establish the field of East Asian studies in the United States. Third, through his work for general audiences, Reischauer’s depiction of Japanese history was arguably the most influential version for college-educated Americans from the 1940s to the 1970s. This helped shape the manner in which many Americans understood Japan. Fourth, Reischauer advocated treating Japan and the Japanese as equals, which was a somewhat rare Western perspective during much of his lifetime.

Packard had to make the strategic decision whether to focus on the influence of Reischauer and his personality on the world or to use Reischauer as an entry point to analyze the era in which he lived. Packard attempts to do a bit of both, with a distinct emphasis on the role of personality in history, reflective of Reischauer’s own bias for seeing the importance of individuals in influencing history. The book is organized chronologically. Chapters one through three explore Reischauer’s early life, including his childhood in Japan as the offspring of missionary parents, his move to America at the age of sixteen (and rejection of organized religion), and the development of his scholarly career as a specialist in early Chinese and Japanese history. Chapter four analyzes his role as a scholar during World War II. His arguments for a more conciliatory approach to US-Japanese relations in the period leading up to the war will be of particular interest to US history teachers and are summarized concisely in six

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pages. His arguments for the retention of the emperor after the war, which were widely attacked in later years, will also be of interest to those teaching Japanese history. Chapters five and six address Reischauer’s life at Harvard from after the end of the war until his 1961 appointment as ambassador to Japan. These chapters explain his role in the establishment of East Asian studies as a field as well as his advocacy, mostly as a dissenting voice, for a different policy toward US-East Asian relations than those being pursued by the government. Chapters seven through nine analyze Reischauer’s years as ambassador from 1961–66. Chapter ten follows his return to the US and the intense attacks by a younger generation of scholars against Reischauer in the late 1960s and 1970s. In chapter eleven, ostensibly exploring the final decade of Reischauer’s life, Packard provides a vigorous attack of his own against the “Japan bashing” and revisionist histories of the 1980s and 1990s (after Reischauer had passed away).

Two interrelated aspects of Reischauer’s career—the disputes over two different conceptualizations of Japanese history and his views on US-East Asian policy—are of most relevance to the secondary and early college classroom. Reischauer took center stage in what turned into a vicious dispute over the proper approach for understanding Japanese history. While the personalities and personal attacks involved in this fight (see chapter ten) are important to academics and will inevitably be rehashed in other reviews of this volume, the substance of the interpretive disagreement and its relevance toward understanding and informing policy decisions toward then contemporary Japan are of greater relevance to the general field.

Four broad themes informed Reischauer’s influential surveys of Japanese history, first published in 1946 and revised numerous times in the ensuing decades. Reischauer emphasized the importance of individuals and personalities rather than broad historic forces in history. Falling under the umbrella of what came to be called modernization theory, Reischauer viewed the Tokugawa era (1600–1868) as a period with many positive developments in Japan that lent much to its rapid modernization after the 1868 Meiji Restoration. He viewed the Meiji Restoration as an essentially positive development, seeing significant benefits for Japan in its industrialization and political reforms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Reischauer interpreted this as an era in which the roots of democracy took hold in Japan. Based on this analysis, he framed the issue of understanding Japan’s move to militarism in the 1930s with the question, “What went wrong?”

During several decades of the twentieth century, many Japanese and some Western scholars used Marxist theory to explain Japan’s history. E. H. Norman, for example, viewed the Tokugawa era as a dark period in Japanese history and the Meiji Restoration as an incomplete revolution from above, resulting in the establishment of an oppressive, non-democratic economic and political system in Japan. Through a Marxist lens, historical forces rule the day and individuals fade into the background.

As Packard explains, Reischauer’s interpretation leads to viewing Japan as having a prewar democratic tradition to be salvaged and supported during the US Occupation of Japan while the Marxist interpretation would call for a more fundamental revolution, including removing the emperor and overthrowing from power many of the people who came to dominate early postwar Japanese politics. While both versions of Japanese history have been supplanted by sixty years of subsequent research, much of it conducted by Reischauer’s former students, Packard’s work does an excellent job of explaining the essential

points of both approaches to history, as well as why and how these interpretations influenced regular people's lives in postwar Japan. In other words, it provides a concrete example of why history and historiography matter, not just in the hallowed halls of Harvard but also in the halls of power.

Reischauer's role as a policy analyst and policymaker is also relevant to the secondary history classroom. Packard's sympathetic but at times critical analysis of Reischauer's public service, particularly his time as ambassador to Japan from 1961–66, is particularly enlightening. Packard documents that Reischauer advocated for recognition of the People's Republic of China as early as 1949, argued against US interventionist policy in Việt Nam as early as the 1950s, and

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urged US policymakers to distinguish between nationalist impulses and Soviet/Chinese expansionism. Furthermore, throughout Reischauer's career he advocated for self-determination and against imperialist aims. Unsurprisingly, Reischauer was a strong advocate of area experts serving in foreign missions at senior levels—something Americans take for granted today.

The above views notwithstanding, as ambassador to Japan, Reischauer remained silent regarding his views toward recognition of the People's Republic of China and publicly supported the escalation of US involvement in Việt Nam despite his personal opposition to some of the decisions. Packard—who resigned his position from the foreign service as an aide to Reischauer in 1965 due to his opposition to US policy in Việt Nam—sympathetically but somewhat critically explains Reischauer's decision to remain ambassador and publicly support US policy in Việt Nam. Teachers will benefit from pages 203 and 225 of Packard's work, in which he succinctly explains the options Reischauer had when faced with the dilemma of publicly supporting an unwise policy as well as possible explanations as to why it may have made sense for Reischauer to do so. These passages both provide a concrete example, which can be used as fodder for a simulation of the difficult personal decisions leaders sometimes need to make, and help students make a case both for and against the route Reischauer chose.

Packard, who worked for Reischauer, has taken on the difficult task of writing a biography of one of his mentors without turning it into an apologia. While I could certainly quibble with some of his evidence, and the work could have benefitted at times from more careful editing to remove some repetition, he has largely succeeded in producing both an important and mostly balanced account of Reischauer's life. This volume will prove useful for teachers in US, World, and East Asian history classrooms. ■

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