

Embracing Defeat

Japan in the Wake of World War II

By John W. Dower

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For those who teach about Japan, or any country other than their own, the issue of how to reach students is a constant challenge. Teachers are always striving to go beyond the textbook and construct activities which actively engage students in their own learning. Do you use a "hook" to "lure the students in" and then get around to the required material, or cover the required material hoping that, through the interesting nature of history itself, students will learn something? Often, from my experience, the problem with the hook approach is that its focus is something odd or weird about another society. Because the hook is not substantive, it reinforces the simplistic view that it is easier to understand other peoples and nations by examining how they are different from ourselves. With recent publications and popularity of such topics as the *yakuza* and *geisha*, one might assume that these topics are more essential for the understanding of Japanese society than they really are.

So how do we get students interested in important historical events—events such as the Allied occupation of Japan? Read John Dower's *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. History here is messy, complicated, emotional and, at times, amusing. In his complex and far-reaching approach to the Allied occupation of Japan, Dower reexamines and chronicles in fascinating detail not only the idealism, arrogance, and contradictory attitudes and policies of the Americans, but also the less-often-told story of the defeated and the many, varied, complex, and surprising Japanese responses to defeat and the occupation. In these responses we don't see unique or essentially Japanese people bound by thousands of years of culture and national character, but human beings who, in the face of great tragedies and unknown futures, reacted in countless expected and unexpected ways.

Embracing Defeat also challenges the notion of the occupation as a seven-year stint in which the Americans tried to establish democracy, followed by Japan's reversion to its "old ways." Rather, Dower argues, the interactions between the "victors and vanquished" between 1945 and 1952 have marked the United States, Japan, and their relationship ever since. The Japanese

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people were not passive recipients of the generous American reforms but actors who shaped the nature of these reforms from all sides, reacted to these reforms in every conceivable manner, and, throughout the postwar years, made these reforms their own.

These interactions are chronicled by Dower in great detail and in imaginative ways; his sources are varied and fascinating, providing substantive hooks for classroom instruction on virtually every page. Among the sources Dower uses are letters to the editor from Japanese newspapers, literature, cartoons, scholarly journals, official American (Supreme Command Allied Pacific) and Japanese documents, diaries, songs, police records, children's games, and posters. All of these sources lend greater understanding to the complexity of reactions and initiatives of the Japanese people during the occupation. A very small example is Dower's use of radio programs to discuss one of the many problems facing Japanese families in the immediate postwar period.

Beginning in January 1946, a radio program called *Returnee News* provided ongoing information concerning the names of incoming repatriates as well as their ports of entry. When this proved inadequate, a program called *Missing Persons* was introduced in June 1946. Almost immediately, the station was inundated with four to five hundred written inquiries a day in addition to dozens of phone calls. By August, broadcast time had been increased to twice daily, five days a week. For a while the program included a special segment—"Who Am I?"—devoted to inquiries from disoriented returned veterans. *Missing Persons* had considerable success in accomplishing its mission. Initially, some forty to fifty percent of the inquiries it broadcast were answered, and until 1950 the program continued to clear up the whereabouts or announce the deaths of significant numbers of individuals. *Missing Persons* continued on the air until March 31, 1962 (p.58).

Contrast this paragraph with standard textbook treatment, if any, on issues of great concern to Japanese people and families during the occupation. The use of such sources provides insight into issues that concerned ordinary Japanese people, not only during the occupation years but far into the postwar period. Furthermore, these sources give us the “hook” of the complexity of history—the lives, concerns, worries, and issues of Japanese people with the “big history” of reforms, constitutions, and governments.

The “big history” is not missing in this book. One of the most thought-provoking sections of *Embracing Defeat* is Dower’s treatment of issues surrounding the emperor. Dower argues that one of the biggest mistakes MacArthur made was to immediately remove the emperor from all issues regarding war responsibility and to ensure that his office remained intact. All issues regarding the emperor were based on American notions, promulgated during the Pacific War, of the incredible spiritual and emotional power the emperor held over all of the Japanese people. Instead of asking him to step down or even trying him as a war criminal, MacArthur used the emperor as a force for democracy. The issues surrounding the emperor are very complicated and definitely worth the read, for Dower makes the argument that this policy regarding the emperor had severe repercussions not only for Japan during the occupation period but also for the Japan of the entire postwar period—and beyond. The farcical nature of the war-crimes trial, the unresolved issues of war responsibility both on individual and national levels in Japan, and the symbolic importance of the emperor’s position as the male unifier of a homogeneous people are all linked to American occupation treatment of the emperor.

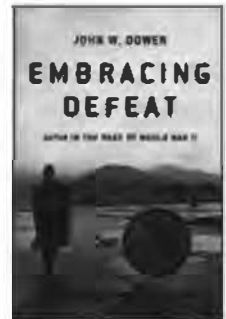
The emperor is only one of many “hooks” this book offers secondary and post-secondary educators for use in teaching about the occupation of Japan. In 1999 the Teaching East Asia/Social Science Education Consortium sponsored an institute, “Japan 1945–1989: Recreating a Modern Nation” in Boulder, Colorado, and a number of teachers who participated have already incorporated aspects of *Embracing Defeat* into their classrooms. Both social studies and English teachers have utilized *haiku* and other literature to examine the reactions to the Allied occupation forces. Others have drawn on individual stories to get to the human side of this period of history. The possibilities for use of *Embracing Defeat* in the classroom are exciting, but educators should also read *Embracing Defeat* to reexamine their own ideas about and approaches to history. ■

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Photograph of John W. Dower by Mark Ostow

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